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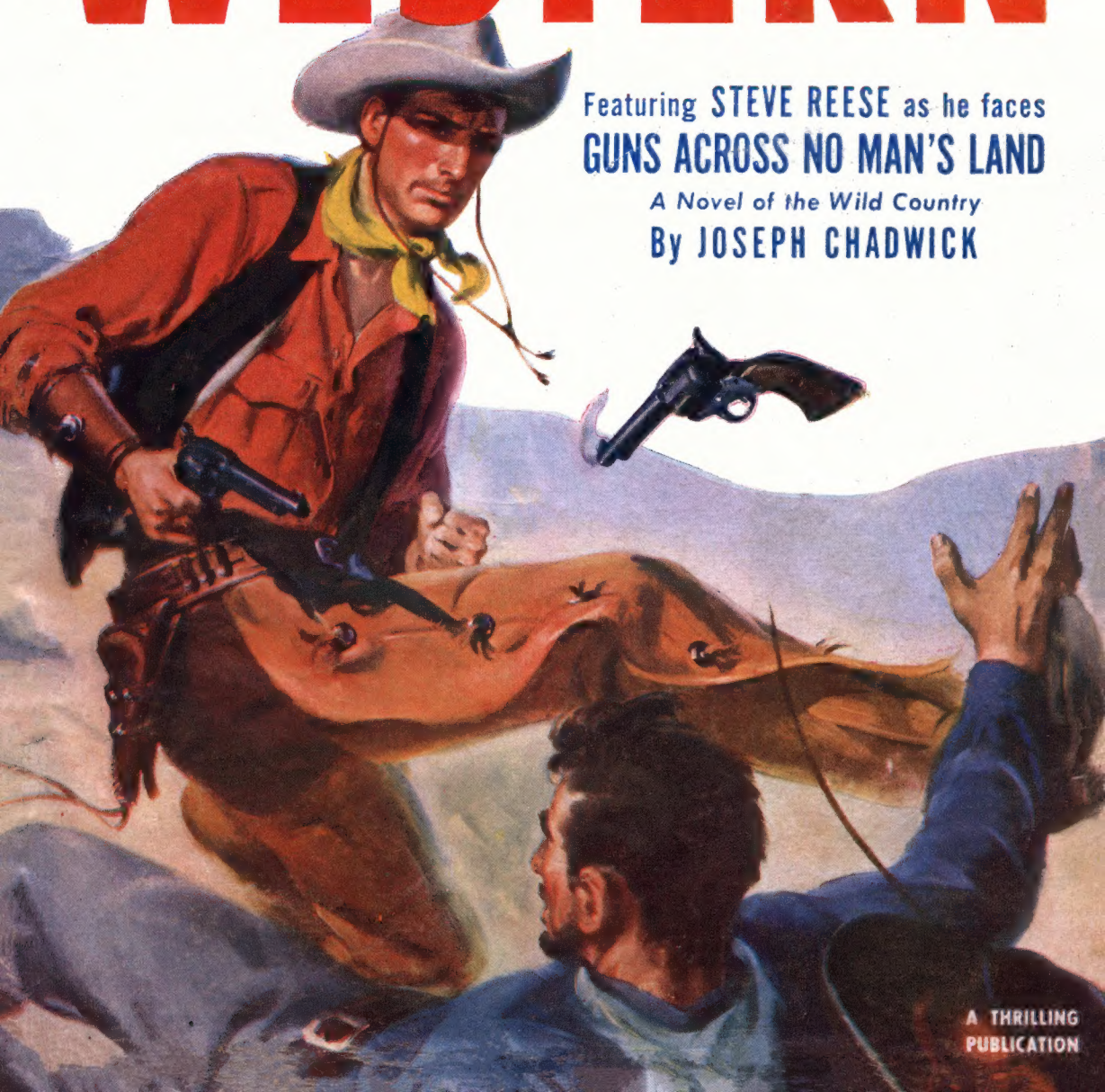

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A Novel of the Wild Country

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

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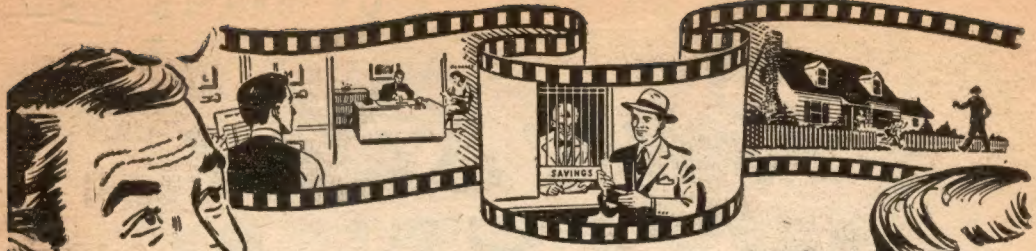

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Range Riders WESTERN

VOLUME 27, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER, 1952

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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TOMAHAWK JUSTICE

By FERRIS WEDDLE

THE COMANCHE camp on a branch of the Canadian River in New Mexico was a peaceful one. Six hunters laughed and talked around a campfire as they roasted choice bits of buffalo meat. But peace did not last long. The heavy reports of three rifles shattered the silence and three Comanches fell. Confused, the three remaining redmen tried to reach their horses corraled but a short distance away. But they, too, were cut down.

Four bearded, triumphant white men broke into the clearing. Laughing, they stooped over the still forms of the Indians. Their keen knives flashed and their hands held the trophies: Indian scalps.

"A present for a pretty senorita in Santa Fe!" one of them yelled, holding up his bloody prize.

White Man Ruthless

MAYBE the reader feels there is something wrong with the above account. That the roles of the participants should be reversed. Ordinarily that is the way the narrating of scalping parties are given. But it doesn't tell the truth, for the white man in the frontier West was often as ruthless when it came to taking scalps as the redmen.

In fact, some careful historians claim that it was the white man who taught the Plains Indians to take scalps.

Whether or not this is true, scalp taking by white men and bounty payments for Indian scalps or heads, began in this country as early as 1641, in the New England area. The states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Virginia and Pennsylvania, among others, offered rewards for Indian locks—with the scalp attached. In territorial Indiana the bounty was fifty dollars!

Bounty payment was not too prevalent west of the Mississippi River because the Westerner needed no encouragement to kill redmen. However, in 1867, one Denver citizen paid ten dollars for each scalp offered him. In another Colorado mining town, Central City, five thousand dollars was raised for scalps at twenty-five dollars each. Probably the largest bounty was offered in Deadwood, Dakota: two hundred dollars for each scalp!

Bloody Practice

THIS bloody practice by men who were supposed to be a civilizing influence on the redmen was not accepted placidly by the Indians in any section of the West. Even the Texas Rangers and other law bodies took scalps on occasion, as did the soldiers.

Why take scalps? The white man did it for the same reason as the Indian—to humiliate the enemy, and to reveal one's ability as a hunter or a warrior.

Today, with injustice still present in dealing with the first Americans, historians and serious students of Western history have revealed, or are revealing, that the white man was to blame for a great percentage of the Indian wars. In dozens of cases the facts

reveal that the white man—whether hunter, trader, trapper, miner, settler, or soldier—was just as savage as the enemies he called savage.

One cannot doubt this when reviewing such battles as that of the Washita, led by Custer, wherein over a hundred Cheyenne and Sioux Indians were killed, including women and children. This attack was in the early morning hours on a peaceful Indian camp.

Sand Creek Massacre

POSSIBLY no massacre by white men has been so condemned, however, than that of Sand Creek. Led by Colonel J. M. Chivington, almost a thousand men, backed

with howitzers, approached the Cheyenne and Arapahoe encampment on Sand Creek near Fort Lyton, Colorado. The Cheyenne chiefs, White Antelope and Black Kettle, had just made peace with the military forces, so the attack was a complete, shattering surprise. Better than half of the Indians were women and children.

Chief Black Kettle ran up an American flag and the white flag of truce, but this did not stop the military, who had been given orders that no Indian was to be spared—man, woman or child. Few escaped and fewer still were taken prisoner.

The white raiders took scalps and mutilated bodies as savagely as the redmen had in the past and as they did in the future. Over one-hundred scalps were taken to Denver where they were publicly displayed, as were a few captive children.

Public indignation, even in the West, led to a Congressional investigation of this affair, but no action was taken against the participants.

The slaughter caused the deaths of hundreds later, for almost all the tribes went on the warpath.

So it was that for over a hundred years, through the 1880s, tomahawk justice was the ruling code in the West.

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THE HORSE MARINES

They're Back in the Saddle Again

ONE has to go back a bit to remember when a beautiful young girl by the name of Ethel Barrymore made her debut in a musical comedy called "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines." And you must have read history to know that the Marines rode horses in the Boxer Rebellion in China, and that they fought in the jungles of Nicaragua from the weather deck of horses.

It has been a long time since the Marines had any mounted men—and even the Army's famous cavalry hung up its saddles and became motorized.

But now time has turned backward, and the

Marines are back in the saddle again. Not all of them, of course, but a few. And the whole setup is hard to believe.

The headquarters of the First Marine Division, the heroes of Guadalcanal, is the old Santa Margarita Rancho near Oceanside, California. It's a little spread of some 125,000 acres which runs along the coast and just north of the Mexican border.

The base was not made over into the usual military drabness, but was left with all the old ranch atmosphere possible. The beautiful adobe ranchhouse is the social center of the place, and the Marine horses belonging to officers and privates alike graze on the hills, along with cattle and sheep which are owned by ranchers leasing grazing rights.

The ranch covers a lot of ground and is unfenced, and therefore has to be patroled. And that is where the Horse Marines come in. Part of that land is so rough that they cannot build jeep roads over it, and some of it lies along the Mexican Border, where wetbacks, illegal Mexican entrants, try to slip into the country. Wild deer have to be protected from poachers, waterholes have to be watched, and prairie fires whipped into submission. Horses have to be broken to the saddle, new colts rounded up and branded in the spring. In short, the Marines who are trained Military Police must firs be cowboys, accustomed to ranch work and a home in the saddle, and living in the outdoors

For outdoor men, the handling of a horse and saddle in California is an attractive way tc spend a hitch in the Marines, and there are many applicants for that duty. But they are screened carefully, and the man who gets the job has to prove a civilian background that would be the envy of a good cowpoke anywhere.

A man with any knowledge of the Army would sneer at the picture of a cowpoke riding one of those skimpy postage-stamp McClelland saddles. But through some oddity in the way things happen in the service, there must have been a serious mistake made by the high brass, for the men actually use stock saddles for the kind of work it takes stock saddles to do. They wouldn't hang a McClelland in their stables.

One old sergeant, who had spent his time in the old Horse Marines in the Boxer Rebellion, remarked that if the First Marine Division got any more horse-happy they would make their next Pacific landing on horseback instead of in boats.

It could be; they throw a rodeo every year at headquarters!

—Allan K. Echols

A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

Guns Across

"The next shot won't be just a warning, hombre!"

No Man's Land

Fighting to save young Dan Norman from a hangrope, Steve Reese and his CPA pals face a roaring gun showdown in wild country

CHAPTER I

Circumstantial Evidence

THE prison guard said, "This is it, sir," and unlocked the door of the death cell. Then in a harsher tone, he said, "You, there. You've got a visitor!"

The visitor stepped inside, and the door that was all iron bars clanged shut. The occupant of the cell who sat on the cot holding his head in his hands, slowly lifted his dull, hopeless gaze from the stone floor.

He was a young man, but his face was haggard and gray with a prison pallor. He said, "Yeah?" There was no real curiosity in his voice. He seemed beyond caring. "Who are you?"

"Reese is my name," the visitor said. "Steve Reese."

"I don't know you, mister."

"I'm from the Cattlemen's Protective Association, Dan."

The prisoner said, "Oh?" but still showed

no particular interest in the matter.

Steve Reese was silent a moment, his eyes turning bleak as he regarded Dan Norman. During his long career as field chief for the CPA and, prior to that, as a lieutenant of police in St. Louis, Reese had had reason to visit other men sentenced to the gallows. And each time he had felt a measure of pity, no matter how vicious a brute the condemned man was. He felt it now for young Dan Norman.

But he also experienced something else—a hunch, perhaps. A feeling that here was a man wrongly sentenced to hang. True, every man he had ever visited in the death cell of this and other prisons had proclaimed his innocence. But not until now had Steve Reese feared a miscarriage of justice.

It was not a baseless hunch, either.

The lawyer who had defended Dan Norman at his trial had told the CPA man, just that morning, "I'm convinced that he's innocent!" And the warden of this prison had told Reese within the hour, "According to the prison grapevine, Norman is innocent. And convicts are seldom wrong about one of their own."

Reese took tobacco sack and cigarette papers from the pocket of his brush-scarred corduroy coat, held them out to Norman. "How about a smoke, Dan?"

Norman shook his head.

REESE'S face turned somber. He returned the makings to his pocket, then said, "Your lawyer, John Langley, got in touch with Colonel Beauvine of the CPA. It occurred to Langley that since you were a member of the Association, you have a claim to its help. He was right."

"A lot of good the CPA can do me."

"Still, we're willing to try to help you, Dan."

"It's too late. I'm to be hanged on the thirteenth. Hanged by the neck until dead! That was the sentence, mister!"

"I admit the CPA might have been of more help if we had learned about your trouble earlier," Reese said, thinking it was going to be hard to get to this young man. "But if we work fast— Will you answer some questions, Dan?"

"Well—" Norman said, and for the first time really looked at his visitor.

He saw a man who might have been mistaken for an ordinary Texas cowman. Besides the old brown corduroy coat, Steve Reese wore a flat-crowned gray Stetson that was somewhat weather-beaten, faded levis and boots that had seen much service. He looked lean and fit, hard-muscled. His skin was bronzed by exposure to sun and wind, and there was premature gray at his temples. But there was about Reese a quality that marked him as out of the ordinary. And Dan Norman seeing that in the CPA man's somber face and probing eyes lost some of his own dull, hopeless look.

"Yes," he said. "I'll answer your questions."

"Good! Did you kill Frank Venable?"

"No! No, I didn't!"

"Do you have an idea who did kill him?"

"No—no, I have to admit that I haven't," Norman said. He rose, began pacing the cell's narrow space. "I don't know who else had a reason to hate him. I was the only one who had trouble with him."

"You threatened to kill him?"

"Yes, but it was just talk. He got me riled up and—"

Reese cut in, "Tell me about it."

He had heard the story from Lawyer Langley, but he wanted to hear it first-hand. He took out his makings again, and rolled and lighted a smoke while Dan Norman spoke, in a low but bitter voice, of the night a rancher named Frank Venable had been murdered. It was substantially the same as the lawyer's version. Dan Norman had ridden into the town of Garrity from his ranch that Saturday night, and had been in O'Leary's Saloon when Venable and some of his Circle V cowhands entered. Venable had been carrying a pair of saddle-bags containing ten thousand dollars in gold and silver specie. He and his men had just returned from delivering five hundred head of cattle to a rancher named Milt Forbes in No Man's Land.

Frank Venable had been a mean enough character when sober, but with a few drinks under his belt he was downright ornery. He'd been feuding with Dan Norman for

nearly a year. Dan's small ranch was located between Venable's home ranch and a second ranch which he had bought. Venable had wanted Dan to sell out to him, so that his holdings would be linked, and the younger man's refusal had infuriated him. Venable, that night in O'Leary's Saloon, had started abusing Dan, and Dan had lost his temper.

No match for Frank Venable, Dan Norman had taken a terrific beating, and during the one-sided brawl Dan had yelled, "I'll kill you!" A dozen or more men had heard the threat, though in court Dan had sworn that he hadn't meant the outburst as a threat.

RANGE DETECTIVE STEVE REESE

Some of the witnesses had finally pulled Venable off Dan, and Dan, dazed and bloody, had stumbled out to his horse and ridden from town.

A half-mile from Garrity, he had left the road just short of the bridge over the Brenoso Creek and dismounted by the stream. He had removed his neckscarf, wet it, washed the blood from his face, then had got back on his horse and crossed the creek without returning to the road and using the bridge. In another hour he had been home, but so done-in that he'd bedded down in some straw in the barn instead of going to the house.

DAN stopped pacing, faced Steve Reese. "The sheriff woke me in the morning—and placed me under arrest. That's the whole of it. I swear it!"

"Sheriff Doan found a fired cartridge in your gun?"

"I'd fired that cartridge a week before, at a jack-rabbit."

"Yeah. You know, Dan, I have a feeling you're telling the truth."

"The jury thought I was lying," Dan said. "And that's what counts. I'm a goner, and there's nothing that can save me. I even tried praying, but I can't see how that'll help." He began pacing again, like a caged wild animal. "Sometimes it seems I'll go crazy before I get to the gallows!"

Reese could find no comforting words, and so was silent.

Dan said, "They claimed that I killed Venable for revenge—and stole his watch and his money to make it look like a robbery. That's why he was killed, all right. Somebody was after that ten thousand dollars Venable carried. But it wasn't me!"

Reese knew from the lawyer, Langley, that neither the money-filled saddle-bags nor Venable's watch had been found at Dan's ranch. But it had been suggested in court that the loot was there, well-hidden. The jury had accepted the suggestion as fact, just as it had accepted the circumstantial evidence of Dan's threat and the fired cartridge in his gun. There had been more such evidence—flimsy evidence, Reese realized, but acceptable to a cow country jury—to put a noose about young Dan Norman's neck.

Frank Venable had left O'Leary's Saloon a half hour after Dan's departure. His cowhands had remained behind, not starting for the Circle V until about midnight. They had found their boss dead on the Brenoso Creek bridge, shot through the back. One man had hightailed back to Garrity for Sheriff Doan.

Doan had made a thorough examination when daylight came, and just below the bridge he cut sign. He found boot tracks and hoof marks by the creek. He also found a wet neckscarf. It was an unusual scarf—bright green silk. The sheriff recognized it

as Dan Norman's. It had been given to Dan by the girl he was to marry.

Dazed from the beating Venable had given him, Dan had dropped and forgotten the scarf after washing the blood from his face. Sheriff Doan had taken Dan to the creek—and Dan's boots had fitted the tracks there. Despite the young rancher's denials of guilt, the sheriff had believed that Dan waited there for Frank Venable to come along, and had shot him from ambush.

All that ran through Steve Reese's mind, and he could understand why Dan had been found guilty. He saw clearly that there was but one way to save the youth—the actual murderer must be found.

He said, "Dan, I'm not going to fill you with false hope. But I give you my word that the CPA will do everything in its power to save you."

He held out his hand, and Dan slowly took it.

"There's one thing you can do," the CPA man said.

Dan looked bewildered. "What's that?" he asked.

"You can try praying again," Reese said, and turned to the door to call the guard to let him out.

Six hours later, at 8:35 PM, Steve Reese dropped from the westbound train at the little cowtown of Garrity. He left his sacked saddle in the box-sized station and walked along the town's main street, turning into a lunchroom where he ordered a supper of steak, potatoes, apple pie and coffee.

The counterman was an amiable fat man, and the CPA man said to him, "Heard you had a big murder here not long ago."

"Yeah. Rancher named Venable was killed."

"They got the murderer?"

"Yeah. Another rancher, a young fellow named Norman."

"What was the trouble between them?"

THE fat man shrugged. "Some kind of range trouble," he said. "But Venable was carrying a lot of money that night. A lot of folks figure Norman killed him for it." His face turned thoughful. "Funny, though. Dan Norman was never in any trouble before. Never seemed like a wild one. And I didn't figure him for a dumb hombre. I never could see how he hoped to get away with it."

"No doubt about him being the murderer?"

"I guess not."

A townsman came in for a cup of coffee and engaged the counterman in conversation, so Reese had no opportunity to ask more questions. Finishing his supper, the CPA man paid for it and left the restaurant. He had learned a little from the fat man—Dan Norman wasn't a trouble-maker, wasn't wild, didn't impress other men as being stupid. The counterman's opinion wouldn't save Dan Norman from the gallows, of course. But it helped convince Steve Reese that he wasn't mistaken in believing that the young rancher was an innocent man.

He located the courthouse midway along the street, and the door marked "Sheriff's Office" stood open. The office was lamplighted, but no one was there. Reese left the building, crossed the street to a false-fronted plank structure bearing a sign that read:

O'LEARY'S SALOON

A half-dozen horses stood at O'Leary's hitch-rack, and Reese, pushing through the batwing doors, found a dozen riders and townsmen in the saloon. He paused just inside the door to roll and light a cigarette, and to look for a star. He found the star, pinned to the shirt front of a gray-mustached man seated at a table.

CHAPTER II

"Get Out of Town"

THE sheriff looked up as Reese approached his table. He had mild blue eyes in a craggy brown face. He was smoking a cigar, and there was an empty glass before him. He had a companion, a ruddy-faced man of forty, in rider's clothes.

Reese said, "I'd like

to talk with you, Sheriff."

"Sure, stranger. Take a chair."

"In private, Sheriff."

"All right," Sheriff Doan said, and looked at the other man. "You mind, George?"

The ruddy-faced man frowned, but then grunted, got up and walked away. Reese seated himself opposite the lawman. He sized Doan up as an old-style peace officer, as a man whose only scientific knowledge of crime detection, if it could be called scientific, was the reading of tracks and the study of fired cartridges.

The old-timer could probably trail a criminal for miles without trouble. But he would be unable to see anything but the obvious. Basically, Sheriff Doan would be a man-hunter—and no detective at all. But his eyes were shrewd, and he was sizing up Reese.

"What's on your mind, mister?" he asked.

Reese decided there was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush, and so said, looking squarely at Doan, "Dan Norman."

The sheriff grabbed the cigar from his mouth, frowned. "What about him?"

"I believe he's the victim of a miscarriage of justice."

Doan's manner turned hostile. "Oh, you do, do you? And just who the hell are you, mister?"

"Reese is my name. Steve Reese." He was reluctant to bring the CPA in if that could be avoided. Some of the ranchers in this part of Texas were members of the Association and he did not want to give them cause to find fault. If they were convinced that Dan Norman was guilty, they would certainly question the right of the CPA to attempt to save him. So Reese added, "John Langley, the lawyer who defended Dan, asked me to make an investigation."

"What gave him the idea that you could make an investigation, Reese?"

"Well, Sheriff, I was a detective on the St. Louis Police Force for some years."

"You look like a cowhand to me."

Reese smiled. "I've been in Texas quite a while," he said. Then, his face turning somber. "You're satisfied that Dan is guilty, that he murdered Venable, Sheriff? Your mind is at rest where he's concerned?"

"So far as I'm concerned, it's a closed case."

"And you won't help me look around?"

"Why should I waste my time?"

Reese was silent a moment, puffing on his cigarette. The old man was still hostile, but he also was slightly on the defensive now—as if a seed of doubt had been sown in his mind by Reese's words.

The CPA man said, "It'd be an ugly thing to happen to a lawman—learning too late that an innocent man had been hanged. Suppose later on you find that somebody was spending a lot of money he couldn't account for? It'd make you suspicious, Sheriff. You'd wonder if the man was spending stolen money—money he'd taken from Frank Venable after killing him."

Doan scowled. "I checked," he said. "There were only a half dozen men in O'Leary's when Venable and his cowhands came in. Dan Norman left after the fight, then Venable started out. Nobody else left the place from then on until Venable's boys pulled out. And only the men in the saloon knew he was carrying all that money. Besides, Dan Norman's tracks were the only ones around the creek bridge."

"Plenty of tracks in the dust of the road, though?"

"Sure, but—"

"The murderer could have stayed on the road the whole time."

"I tell you nobody followed Venable out of O'Leary's!" Doan said. "I checked with O'Leary. And with every man who'd been in the place that night." He looked across at the bar, called, "George—Pat! Come here a minute."

THE ruddy-faced man returned to the table, followed by the bartender.

Doan said, "This hombre is Steve Reese. He used to be a St. Louis police detective, and now he's trying to save Dan Norman from the gallows." He looked back at Reese. "George Macklin here was Venable's foreman. He's now running the Circle V for Venable's brother, who lives in Kansas. And Pat O'Leary here owns this place."

George Macklin's eyes were ugly. And he said, "Reese, a man can get himself some real trouble by trying to save a murderer from hanging."

But O'Leary, a little bald man, said, "He can't do it, George. Let him have his say. Me, I'm curious."

Reese smiled faintly. "Thanks, O'Leary," he said. "Show me that nobody but Dan Norman could have murdered Venable, and I'll apologize and clear out." He looked up at the angry George Macklin. "When Venable and the rest of you rode in from No Man's Land that night was this saloon your first stop?"

"Sure. Where else would we have stopped?"

"Then nobody else but the men already here that night knew Venable was carrying the money?"

"That's it," Macklin growled.

Reese looked at O'Leary. "And nobody left after Venable came in with the money in his saddle-bags?"

O'Leary nodded. "That's right. Everybody stayed because Venable started buying drinks for everybody. Then he and Norman got to arguing and fighting. Venable left about a half-hour after Norman, and everybody else stayed to talk about the fight. I should know, Reese. My business was mighty good that night, just because of what happened."

The saloonman seemed a keen-witted sort. "I can name the men who were here," he went on. "The ones besides Dan Norman and Frank Venable and the Circle V crew. There was the Barton brothers. They own the Double B spread over on Tulare Meadows, and they're pretty well-fixed. There was Jube Wyman who owns the Lazy W, and he's crowding seventy and never packs a gun. The others were town men. Pete Henry, the stationmaster. Herb Donley. He owns a store. And Mike Fletcher, the blacksmith."

O'Leary shook his head. "None of them followed Venable away from here," he said emphatically. "And since nobody else in town knew about the money—"

"Let's forget the money for a minute," Reese cut in. "Did Venable have any enemies besides Dan Norman?"

The three men spoke in unison, all saying that Venable had had no other enemies.

Then Pat O'Leary added, "Listen, Reese—I always liked Dan Norman. I liked him more than I liked Frank Venable. And I thought Venable did him dirt that night. But I'm convinced that Dan went loco after that beating and—"

"And," George Macklin interrupted, "he bushwhacked Frank." He pushed O'Leary aside, stood over Steve Reese. "Nobody's changing that. Me, I aim to see that Norman hangs. So you, mister, can get out of town—pronto!"

"You want to see Dan Norman hanged no matter what, eh, Macklin?"

"Yeah. The murderer. And that's Dan Norman."

"If you're so sure of his guilt," Reese said, "why be in such a rush to get me out of town? You afraid I may find something that will point toward somebody else?"

Macklin swore. "You won't find a thing," he said. "But I'm not giving you a chance to rig something that will make it look like he's not guilty. You getting out of town on your own—or do I have to run you out?"

Reese dropped his cigarette to the floor, flattened it with his boot. Everybody in the barroom was watching him now. There was a heavy quiet, one taut with expectancy. Reese rose. He was smiling faintly, but his dark eyes were unamused. He faced George Macklin.

"I've been doing this kind of work all my adult life, friend," he said. "More times than I can remember, somebody has tried to scare me off a case. But I don't scare easy. I'm not leaving town right now, on my own or with you running me off."

MACKLIN struck without warning, and the blow, with all his weight behind it, was aimed at the CPA man's face.

Reese ducked, but not quickly enough. Macklin's fist caught him in a glancing blow alongside the face, and he went reeling against the table. Sheriff Doan was on his feet, yelling at Macklin to quit it, but the Circle V foreman had gone berserk. He rushed Reese, battering the field chief about

As he caught hold of the animal's reins, he heard the shout: "There's Reese!"

the body while he was still off-balance.

Reese turned sideward, dropped into a crouch, and slammed his left shoulder into Macklin. He heard Macklin's grunt under the impact, felt the man's bulk give way. He drove into him again, in the same hard attack. Macklin was thrown back against the bar. Reese came erect, waited, ready now for whatever Macklin would try to give him.

He saw the ugly look of rage on the man's face, and knew that he would have a hard fight on his hands unless he ended it quickly. Macklin outweighed him by perhaps thirty pounds, and all his weight was brawn. To end it quickly, Reese would have to make use of all his skill. If he had any advantage at all, it was the edge a knowledge of boxing gave a man over a knock-down-and-drag-'em-out brawler.

And in this moment while George Macklin girded himself for another rush, Steve Reese saw with his mind's eye that this was how it would be. He would have to fight every step of the way in his attempt to save Dan Norman from the gallows.

Macklin shoved away from the bar, lunging at Reese and knocking old Sheriff Doan aside when the lawman tried to stop him. Reese side-stepped, drove two short jabs to Macklin's face. Macklin stopped short, a surprised look spreading over his ruddy face. Then he rushed once more, taking two more punches to the face, and caught the CPA man in a bear hug.

Reese was lifted, whirled about, flung bodily against the bar. He hung there, numbed by the pain in his back. And Macklin did not stand back and give him a chance to recover. The Circle V man drove at him hunched over, butting Reese with his left shoulder in the same manner that Reese had butted him at the start.

The breath was knocked out of Reese, and he sagged against the bar. Macklin backed off and then came at him again. Macklin catapulted his bulk, and Reese whipped away the last instant before the impact.

And Macklin slammed into the bar!

The jolt rocked the bar along its entire length, and bottles crashed to the floor. Macklin howled, fell to his knees, blood spurting from a cut over his right eye. He lifted a hand, wiped the blood away, then stared up at Reese with hate-filled eyes. Reese had stepped back and was giving his man a chance to recover. He wouldn't take an unfair advantage, even to end the fight.

He said, "Better call it quits, Macklin. You can't give me a beating like your boss gave Dan Norman that night. Be sensible, friend."

There was no anger in his voice, and the watching men stared at him with amazement. But George Macklin had a stiff pride, and he had made such a poor showing that he wouldn't let it end half- finished. One of the whisky bottles had landed near him. He reached out, gripped the neck of the broken bottle, then heaved to his feet. He intended to use the jagged glass as a weapon.

Again Sheriff Doan tried to stop him.

This time Reese said, "Keep out of it, Sheriff. He's a man who has to be licked." Then he braced himself as Macklin came at him.

The broken bottle slashed at his face, but Reese struck it aside by hitting Macklin's wrist. At the same instant he drove his right fist into the man's face. Macklin's knees buckled, but he tried again to slash Reese's face with the bottle. Reese hit him once more, and Macklin collapsed and sprawled unconscious on the floor.

THERE was a moment of silence, then a man said savagely, "Let's fix that hombre!" He and another man started at Reese, but Pat O'Leary, behind the bar again, produced a shotgun.

The saloonman said, "It was a fair fight —more than fair on Reese's part. You Circle V men pull in your horns, or there's going to be real trouble!"

Sheriff Doan, too, ordered the men to keep out of it.

Reese had lost his hat during the brawl. He stooped and picked it up, then dusted and reshaped it. Except for the two Circle V hands, there was a change in the manner of the crowd toward him. His whipping Macklin without resorting to dirty tactics had won a measure of admiration.

Sheriff Doan put it into words, saying, "Reese, you'll have a free hand to investigate Venable's murder. I'll see to that. And I'll give you a helping hand, even though I'm certain you'll find nothing new."

Reese said drily, "Thanks." Then, after a moment's thought: "I've a hunch now that I won't find anything around here. But there's one question I'd like to have answered."

"What's that?"

"Did you try to find out if there were any strangers around these parts the night Venable was bushwhacked?"

Sheriff Doan nodded. "I thought of that," he said. "It occurred to me, when Dan Norman kept saying he was innocent, that some tough hands might have trailed Venable and his crew down from No Man's Land. I tried to be fair, Reese."

"What did you find—that nobody saw any strangers about?"

"Well, there was a man who claimed he sighted a stranger riding north through the back country the day after the killing," Doan said. "But I couldn't get anybody else to back him up on it, and I couldn't take his word alone for it."

"Who is the man?"

"Mike Hurley. He owns a little ranch about a dozen miles north of here."

"Why is his word no good, Sheriff?"

"I'm not saying his word is no good," the old lawman said. "On most matters, Hurley is an honest man. I can say that because I've known him for twenty-odd years. But even an honest man may be reckless with the truth when he's trying to help a friend. You see, Reese, Dan Norman was to marry Mike's daughter."

Reese nodded. "I can see why you couldn't take Hurley's word for such a thing," he said. "But just on the chance that he was telling the truth, I'll have a talk with him." He turned toward the door, then looked at the sheriff again. "Want to come with me?"

"At this time of night?"

"Sure," Reese said. "There's no time to waste. Dan Norman is to hang on the thirteenth."

CHAPTER III

One Chance in a Million

HALF an hour later, Steve Reese and the Sheriff rode out of town. Reese was on a sorrel gelding he had hired from the livery stable. He had got his own saddle from the railroad station. His rifle was in the saddle-boot, and his bedroll was tied behind the cantle. Sheriff Doan was mounted on a big gray horse. They rode at an easy lope that dropped the miles behind without tiring the horses. It wasn't a hard ride. They kept to the road, and there was a bright moon to light their way.

It was after midnight when they turned onto a side road, and Sheriff Doan said, "Mike's ranch headquarters is about a mile ahead, close to some low hills. It was in the hills that he saw the strange rider. The one he claims he saw."

The ranch building were dark, but a light appeared in the house shortly after Doan called the rancher's name. They reined in in the middle of the yard, and shortly a man opened the door.

"Jess Doan, Mike," the sheriff identified himself. "I've a man here who'd like to talk to you."

"Sure. Come on in."

They dismounted, entered a small but comfortably furnished parlor. Mike Hurley was a graying man of slight build, rather mild-mannered. He had pulled his levis on over his nightshirt and put on a pair of carpet slippers.

"Something about Dan, Jess?" he asked.

Before Doan could reply a slender blonde girl appeared from another room. She had hastily donned a wrapper and slippers. Her hair was tousled and her cheeks flushed from sleeping. But her eyes were wide-awake, bright—hopeful, it seemed to Steve Reese. He removed his hat, as did the sheriff.

"What is it, Sheriff?" she asked. "Has—has something happened to Dan?"

"No, Sally," Doan said. "But this man—well, his name is Steve Reese. He's come to investigate the trouble all over again. He has some notion of saving Dan."

The girl turned to Reese. "You think—" she began, and then choked up.

It was plain to Reese, after one glance at Sally Hurley that the girl had been enduring torment ever since Dan Norman's arrest, and it seemed cruel to give her hope when there still appeared to be no chance of saving the young rancher from the gallows. He wished he had made an attempt to talk with her father without her knowledge. But the damage was done now, and the girl would have to bear up under the disappointment.

He said, "No, I don't think that there is a real chance of saving Dan. At least, not at the moment. Maybe something will turn up, and that's why I came here at such an hour." He turned to Mike Hurley. "I

wanted to know about the rider you saw the day after the murder."

"Jess here thinks I lied," Mike Hurley said. "So does everybody else."

"Tell me about him," Reese said. "He was a stranger to you?"

"Sure," Hurley said. "I never saw him on this range before or since. It was just by luck that I sighted him. We were short of kindling for the cookstove, and I had to go into the hills to cut some wood. I hitched up a team to my wagon and got out to the hills before sunup. I pulled up by a cedar brake and decided to have a smoke before I got busy chopping. I was sitting there puffing on my pipe when I heard a rider coming. He was coming through the cedar thicket, which struck me as plenty odd. Most riders would swing wide around a stretch of brush or trees. It seemed to me that somebody was going to a lot of bother not to be seen. Well, this hombre broke from the cedar brake and saw me. I could see that it scared him. Anyway, he gave his roan mount a jab with his spurs and hightailed, headed north. I lost sight of him right away, there in that hill country."

"He was riding a roan, eh?"

"Yeah. A strawberry roan."

"What did he look like, Hurley?"

"A big hombre, but not heavy," Hurley said. "Horse-faced. He had a stubble of beard, and it was black as a hat. He had a bedroll tied behind his saddle, and the roan was carrying a pair of saddle-bags. A Winchester on his saddle, too. A rough-looking bucko. I'd guess he was between thirty-five and forty."

REESE felt a stirring of excitement, and saw that old Sheriff Doan was looking thoughtful and a bit uneasy. But Sally Hurley cinched it for the CPA investigator.

The girl said excitedly, "It's true! Dad told me about the rider when he came in with the wood. And that was long before we heard that Frank Venable had been killed and that—that Dan had been arrested for killing him!"

Sheriff Doan turned to Reese. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I think," Reese said, "that I'd better ride in the same direction that stranger was headed—north. What was the name of the rancher to whom Venable sold his herd? Milt Forbes?"

"That's it," Doan said. "Forbes has a ranch on Squaw Creek up there in the Neutral Strip. But you can't blame this on him, Reese. He wasn't the rider Mike saw. I know Milt Forbes. I've known him for a dozen years."

"Still," the CPA man said, "I'm going to have a talk with him."

He was beginning to think there was a chance—one chance in a million!

Sheriff Doan said he couldn't accompany Reese to No Man's Land, and explained, "I have no authority in the Strip. No lawman has any up there."

But he didn't argue against Reese's going. In fact, Doan's manner suggested that he regretted not having taken Mike Hurley's word about the strange rider, for it put him in a bad light.

"Anything else I can do?" he asked.

"If Mike will furnish me with a good, fast mount," Reese said, "you can take my livery stable horse back to town. It's not too sound of wind. And you can send a telegram for me, once you're back in Garrity."

Hurley went to put on his boots, so that he could go outside to get a mount for Reese, and Sally offered to make some coffee and get a bite to eat. Reese took an old envelope and a pencil from his coat pocket, and wrote a message addressd to Hank Ball, also a CPA investigator, and usually one of Reese's own to special aides in the field. Hank was in Dodge City where, with his partner, Dusty Trail, he had been working on a rustling case.

The message read:

PROCEED IMMEDIATELY FORBES RANCH, SQUAW CREEK, NO MAN'S LAND.

Reese signed it "Doc," a nickname with which Hank and Dusty had tagged him because they claimed he looked more like a professional man than a cow detective, and that certainly he handled an investigation with all the painstaking care of a surgeon performing an operation.

By starting for No Man's Land upon receipt of the telegram, the two rowdy, devil-may-care but efficient CPA investigators should reach the Forbes Ranch not long after Reese himself.

He gave the message to Sheriff Doan, then handed him money enough to cover its cost and the hire of the livery stable bronc. Doan said that he would get started back to Garrity, then added, offering his hand to the CPA field chief, "I wish you luck, Reese. If I've made a mistake, I want to know it. And"—he smiled ruefully—"I'm beginning to think maybe I did make one."

Once the sheriff left the house, Reese went to the kitchen where Sally Hurley was busy fixing what appeared to be a full-sized meal. She looked at him with excited eyes, and said, "You'll find that man. I know you will!"

"Just so I find him in time, Sally."

"You've got to, Mr. Reese!"

"Finding him will be only a part of it. I'll then have to prove that he killed Frank Venable. And that may take some doing. He won't just up and confess, you know."

"You'll prove it," Sally said firmly. "I'm sure of it."

Reese took out makings, started a cigarette. He wasn't so sure. It wouldn't be easy to find a man in the vast stretch of wild country called No Man's Land. Extending across the northern border of the Texas Panhandle, with Kansas and Colorado to the north and New Mexico to the west and Indian Territory to the east, it was a larger country than the two states of Delaware and Rhode Island.

IT WAS thirty-four and a half miles wide and one hundred and sixty-seven miles long, a land that the Congress of the United States had forgotten when setting the boundaries of the western states and territories. It was without law officers and courts, and populated by only a few venturesome cattlemen and settlers—and a vast number of riff-raff and outlaws.

It was a haven for rustlers, horse thieves, murderers, for any man on the dodge from the law. And a lawman took his life in his hands when he crossed its borders. True, Steve Reese was not a peace officer officially. But he was an investigator for the CPA, and was feared by cow country outlaws. And when such men were afraid, they were dangerous.

Reese puffed his cigarette alight, sobered by the thought that he would be gambling with his own life—to save the life of another man. And despite Sally Hurley's belief that he would return with the murderer of Frank Venable, he knew that the odds were against him.

Mike Hurley came into the kitchen, saying, "I've shifted your saddle to a good buckskin bronc, Reese. He'll take you where you want to go and, I hope, bring you back. You know the Neutral Strip?"

"I know of it," the CPA man said gravely.

"You'll be a marked man the moment you start asking around about a hombre riding a strawberry roan."

"You know Milt Forbes?"

"Yeah. He used to own a spread south of here."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"A square-shooter," Hurley said. "You can trust him. Maybe he'll be able to give you a little help, but don't count on it too much. Milt can't afford to make enemies of the outlaw element in the Strip. That would ruin him, maybe cost him his life."

Sally set a place at the table for Reese, told him to sit up. He obeyed, not because he was hungry now but knowing he had a long, hard ride ahead of him and it was better to start out on a full stomach. While he ate, Mike Hurley told him how to find the Forbes ranch on Squaw Creek. After the meal, Reese put on his hat and looked to his gun. Both Hurley and his daughter went to the door with him.

And as he rode the buckskin away from there, he heard Sally call good-bye to him, and her father yell, "Luck to you, friend!"

Luck.

He would need plenty of luck from now on.

Reese forded Palo Duro Creek in the gray dawn and, with the buckskin cow pony still showing no signs of tiring, he headed north-

east toward the Coldwater. He came to a ranch headquarters late in the afternoon, and the rancher, a man named Givens, was glad to talk with someone. He was alone except for his horses and his dog. He invited Reese to have dinner with him, and the CPA man, knowing that he should rest his horse, accepted the invitation.

Since Givens' place was close by the road, Reese questioned him about Frank Venable and his crew.

The rancher nodded. "I knew Venable. Heard he was killed a month or so ago. Yeah, I saw him right before that. He passed by here with six or seven other riders, on his way back from the Strip. It was near dark. He stopped to water his horses."

"This is important," Reese said. "Did another rider pass your place some time after Venable and his men?"

"Not that I—yeah, I remember now!" Givens said. "It was full dark before they went their way. I was inside the house, getting ready to go to bed when I heard another rider. Didn't see him, though. Why? What's it all about?"

"I think that rider you heard was Venable's murderer," Reese said, and then had to explain, to repay Rancher Given's hospitality, about how he believed that the wrong man had been blamed for the murder. "I'm glad to know that there was a rider following the Venable crowd," he added. "It convinces me that I'm on the right track."

CHAPTER IV

In the Nick of Time

IT WASN'T that Reese had doubted Mike Hurley's word. But now that he had talked to Givens he was even more convinced that the unknown rider had trailed Frank Venable and his crew down from No Man's Land in the hope of finding an opportunity of robbing the cowman. The trailer had gambled upon catching Venable alone long enough to accomplish his purpose, and he had won his gamble.

That rider, whoever he was, was as bold as he was cunning, but he'd had little to lose, of course, if he failed to overtake Venable when the rancher was unaccompanied by his crew. He'd ventured nothing but the time and effort involved in trailing Venable. In stalking him, Reese reflected.

More than ever now, the CPA man felt that he was following the right course in going to see Milt Forbes. It must have been at the Forbes Ranch that the killer learned that Venable was carrying a large amount of money.

After eating noon chuck with Givens, Reese resaddled the buckskin and called his thanks to the man as he rode out. He covered many long miles during the afternoon, and at sundown stopped at a cow camp near the Coldwater where he was given another hand-out meal. The men in the camp were a hard-looking lot, and because of that, and because they were located so close to the Neutral Strip, Reese did not ask them any questions. He knew that it would be best to trust no one from here on, except perhaps Milt Forbes.

It was nearly dark when he left the cow camp, and he traveled only a half-dozen miles more before again stopping. The buckskin was still going strong, but he decided that it should be rested. It was now more than forty-eight hours since he'd had any sleep, too. He off-saddled the horse, staked it out, spread his bedroll, and was almost immediately asleep.

He woke at midnight, smoked a cigarette, then saddled up.

He was across in the Strip now, and it was no different in appearance than that part of Texas he had left behind. The country was undulating prairie, a vast expanse of grama grass plains, treeless except for clumps of cottonwoods along the shallow streams and cedars in the sandy stretches. But there were stretches of broken country too; craggy bluffs and rocky, eroded hollows. And brush thickets dense with grapevine, wild plum and other twisted growths.

He guided himself by the stars, for there no longer was a road, and he now headed northwest.

He passed no ranches or settler places; or at least, he sighted none even though the moon was bright. There were ranches and cow camps, he knew, but they would be widely scattered. And the few towns and most of the settlers were located in the eastern end of the Strip, except for some scattered habitations to the north along the Kansas line.

At sunup Reese again halted to rest his mount, and to water the buckskin by a small stream. He saw small bunches of cattle when he rode on, following the creek downstream, and an hour later sighted Milt Forbes' ranch buildings.

He lost sight of them the next moment, due to a clump of scrub cottonwoods that grew along the creek bank. He forded the stream, broke through the trees, and saw the buildings again. The nearest was only a hundred feet from him. It was like the others, constructed of sod, but since this one had an adjoining corral, Reese knew it was the barn.

Sod buildings were peculiar to No Man's Land. Reese had heard that even in Beaver City, the largest settlement in the Strip, were only a few wooden buildings. It was a crude sort of architecture, but it was the cheapest that could be put up, and cheapness was a consideration in a land as poor as this. But the sod was easily cut into blocks, and as easily bricked into walls. Sod buildings were warm in winter, cool in summer. Appearances did not matter to such people as made their homes in No Man's Land.

Reese was walking his horse, and so there was no loud drumming of hoofs to herald his approach. He rounded the corner of the barn, then pulled the buckskin to a quick stop. And jerked his rifle from its boot as he swung down from the saddle. He jacked a cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber as he hit the ground.

And called out: "All right, buckos! That's enough!"

HE HAD come around the barn just as a mounted man felled a man afoot by striking him with the barrel of his six-shooter. The hit man rolled in the dust, over close to the ranchhouse. Beyond him stood a second man, an older man, and he was making an angry outburst. But, being unarmed, he could not back up his words with action.

Three horsemen sat their mounts in the middle of the yard. Their backs had been to Reese, but as he shouted at them, they wheeled their horses about to face him. There was no doubt in Reese's mind that the riders were intruders and that the gun-whipped man and his angry companion belonged on the ranch. And there was no doubt, either, that these four were hard-cases who wouldn't be stopped by words alone.

He squeezed the Winchester's trigger, putting his slug so close to the nearest rider that its shriek made the fellow flinch. Then Reese shouted, "The next shot won't be just a warning, hombre! Keep your hand away from your gun—and tell that partner of yours who's using his for a club to put it away!"

The rider beaded by the CPA man's rifle was a beefy man with a flabby face bristly with rust-red beard. He stared at Reese, his right hand gripping the butt of his revolver. After a moment the arrogant look left him, and he lifted his hand and signaled to his three companions. The man who had been using his weapon for a club reluctantly holstered it.

Over at the house, a girl wearing levis appeared at the door and handed a shotgun to the man who had been cussing out the four riders. He moved around to flank them, and the girl ran to the downed man.

The man with the shotgun said, "Now you hombres make tracks—pronto!"

The flabby rider began, "Listen, Forbes—"

"You want to find out what a load of buckshot does to a man, Hackett?"

The others were eager to pull out, and after a moment Hackett growled, "All right, Forbes. Have it your way, for now. But you can't get away with anything like this." He looked at Reese, his face ugly with a scowl. "As for you, stranger, you'd

better head back to wherever you came from. The Strip will be too hot for you, once I report you to the Territorial Council for interfering with the tax collectors for Cimarron Territory!"

With that outbust, he wheeled his horse and the four of them rode away at a hard lope.

Steve Reese stared after them with bewilderment, wondering what the Cimarron Territory was. He'd never heard of it until now. As for the four riders, they looked more like bandits than tax collectors. And he did not doubt that they could—and probably would—make the Neutral Strip plenty hot for him.

Reese booted his rifle, then turned from his horse to face the man with the shotgun. The man he had come to see, Milt Forbes. The rancher was about fifty-five, gray of mustache and leathery of skin.

He thrust his right hand out to the CPA man, and said, "Thanks, stranger. Hadn't been for you, those toughs would have roughed me up plenty. They caught me and my one hired hand without our guns. Milt Forbes is my name."

"Steve Reese, Forbes. I'm glad I happened by at the right time." He looked across at the gun-whipped hired hand. "Maybe you'd better see if he's hurt very bad."

They crossed the ranchyard to where the girl wearing rider duds was helping the hurt man to his feet. He had been hit above the left eye, and the gun barrel had left an ugly welt on his forehead. He was a small, wiry young fellow with red hair and china-blue eyes. He looked more angry than hurt. The girl helped him to a bench at the front of the house, and he sagged onto it, leaning on the girl.

"How bad is it, Red?" Forbes asked.

"Bad enough to make me want to pay somebody back," Red declared angrily. "And that's just what I'm going to do!" He was still a little dazed, and stared blankly at Reese. "Who's this?"

"Steve Reese," Forbes told him. "He helped me chase that bunch off. Reese, this is Red Tyson. And one of my daughters, Ginny."

REESE nodded to Tyson, removed his hat and bowed slightly to the girl. Ginny Forbes smiled at him, but her smile was forced. She was so anxious about Red Tyson that it was apparent she was in love with him. She said she would get something to ease the pain in his head, and turned into the house.

Forbes was sizing Reese up, and evidently he liked what he saw. For he said, "Wouldn't be looking for a job, would you?"

"You don't owe me anything for siding you, Forbes."

"Wasn't thinking of that, Reese. I've been hoping a good man would come along ever since my other rider quit a couple of months ago. Plenty of drifters here in the Strip, but few if any of them are worth a durn. But you look like an all right hombre."

Reese had long ago learned that it could be profitable to let other people keep talking, and he was alert to the fact that Forbes had lost a hand about two months ago. And Frank Venable had been murdered two months ago. He took out makings, built a smoke.

"Looks like a man should draw fighting wages here," he said. "What happened to the man who quit? Did he lose his nerve because of that crowd you're having trouble with?"

"Naw. Duval quit before this trouble started."

"Duval? That wouldn't be—?"

"Jake Duval. You know him?"

"A big man with a horse face and real black whiskers?" Reese prompted. His manner was casual, but excitement was building up inside him. "Rides a strawberry roan?"

Forbes nodded. "That's the man," he said. "He worked for me about six months, then one day he rolled his bedding and pulled out. Didn't even ask for his time."

"That was the day—or maybe the day after—Frank Venable delivered some cattle to you?" Reese asked, and lighted his cigarette.

"Yeah. It was the same day. Say, what are you getting at?"

"You know that Venable was murdered

the same night he got back to his own range?"

Forbes nodded. "Say, you ain't a Texas lawman?"

Reese smiled. "Not exactly," he said. He decided that to obtain help here he would have to confide a little in Milt Forbes. "I'm with the Cattlemen's Protective Association. The man sentenced to hang for Venable's murder is a member of the CPA. I've reason to believe that he's not guilty of the murder. So I'm doing a little checking."

"On Jake Duval?" It was Red Tyson who asked that. He looked excited.

Reese said. "Duval knew that Venable left here with ten thousand dollars in his saddle-bags. Duval was seen a few miles from where Venable was bushwhacked a few hours after the murder. I didn't know his name until now, but I had a description of him. And I figured the killer must have been here when Venable was paid his cattle money."

Red said, "Yeah—you know, Duval said a funny thing to me that day. He said, 'If I'd known old Milt kept so much money on hand, I'd have helped myself to it.' Me, I thought he was joking. But he must have been in earnest. But how'd he kill and rob Frank Venable? Venable had seven riders with him."

"He caught Venable alone, just short of his ranch," Reese said. "When seen, Duval was headed north. He must have come back to No Man's Land with his loot. Have you men seen anything of him since the day he quit?"

Forbes shook his head.

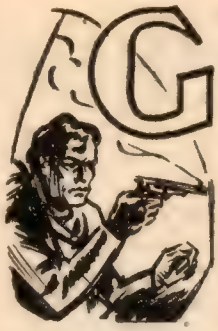
Red Tyson said, "I saw him about a week ago, over at Sodville. I drove over to get some flour, salt and coal-oil. Duval rode by while I was loading the stuff onto the wagon. I yelled at him, but he didn't answer."

"Sodville is that outlaw hangout over near Indian Territory?"

"No," Tyson said. "That's Sod Town. But Sodville is the same kind of a place. It's about a dozen miles north of here. And it's headquarters for that bunch of hardcases that was here this morning."

CHAPTER V

Bells of No Man's Land



GINNY came from the house with a basin of water and a towel. She placed the basin on the bench, wet one end of the towel, and said, "Hold your head up, Red." Her voice was gentle as she spoke to Red Tyson.

But he frowned, and said, "Look — I don't need a fuss made over me."

"It hurts you, doesn't it?"

"Well—"

"Then let me doctor you up," Ginny said firmly.

It was obvious to Steve Reese, who now stepped back to give the girl room to do her doctoring, that the young cowpuncher was oblivious to Ginny's charms and her strong feelings for him. The next moment he understood why Tyson did not find her attractive. Another girl came from the house. A tall, darkly beautiful girl wearing a dark green riding skirt and a starched white blouse. She had a bright green silk scarf tied like a band about her head, its ends hanging loosely at the back of her neck.

Reese saw how Red Tyson's eyes lighted at sight of her, and he himself felt a stirring of interest. But looking closer, the CPA man saw that this girl's beauty was marred by a sulky expression about the mouth and a sullen look in her eyes.

She held a small jar out to Ginny. "Here's the salve you wanted," she said, and her voice was as sullen as her eyes.

"Hold onto it a minute," Ginny said. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I'm going for a ride, and you know it."

"You've got all day to ride," Ginny said. "Anyway, you shouldn't be riding alone." She wet the towel again, placed it back on Tyson's forehead. "Or maybe you won't be riding alone. Maybe you're going to meet that no-good Cleve Lambert."

"That's my affair, isn't it?"

"And everybody else's. Dad told you not to see him."

"I'm over twenty-one," the dark-haired girl said. "I'll see whoever I want to see. I'm not a child."

Red Tyson's eyes were bleak now as he looked at her, and before the name Cleve Lambert had been mentioned just a moment before, his gaze had been adoring. Ginny took the jar of salve from her sister. She looked exasperated.

"All right, Princess," she said. "Go meet that dude!"

Milt Forbes was frowning, but he didn't speak. His older daughter turned away with a defiant toss of her head, crossing to the corral where a paint pony stood tethered at the gate. She untied the pony, mounted, and rode off toward the north. They all watched her go.

Finally Ginny said, "You oughtn't to allow it, Dad."

Forbes shook his head. "Like Louise says, she's over twenty-one. She's a grown woman, and she has a right to live her own life. She's unhappy here and—well, I can't fuss with her and make her more unhappy." He was silent a moment, then added, "Besides, we've got no proof that Lambert is crooked."

Ginny didn't reply to that. She applied salve to Tyson's injury.

But Tyson said, "Me, I don't need any more proof than I've already got!" It was apparent that he hated Lambert, and that his hatred was based on jealousy. He was as hopelessly in love with Louise Forbes as Ginny was with him. "Listen, Milt," he went on, "it was Cleve Lambert who appointed Luke Thatcher as marshal of this part of the Strip, and Thatcher sent those toughs here. What more proof do you want, anyway?"

Forbes shook his head, not wanting to argue.

He said, "When you're done here, Ginny, how about rustling up a meal for Mr. Reese? He's probably skipped some meals, coming up from Texas."

The girl said, "I'll be glad to," and smiled at Steve Reese.

But her eyes were as unhappy as Red Tyson's were angry.

FORBES went along when Reese put up his horse, watering and graining it after off-saddling it. The rancher was troubled.

He told the CPA man, "I like this country, but it's no place for young women. Ginny doesn't mind it too much, but Louise—well, it's pretty lonely for her. She's got mixed up with this Cleve Lambert, and I know he's a wrong one. But I don't know what to do about it."

They were standing outside the barn.

Ginny had gone into the house, and Red Tyson was saddling a horse at the corral.

Reese said, "Red mentioned a man named Luke Thatcher a little while ago. There's a Texas outlaw by the same name, a bad hombre who's wanted by the Rangers."

"The same man."

"And he's a friend of this Cleve Lambert's?"

Forbes nodded. "Up to a few months ago, things were quiet here in No Man's Land," he said. "The outlaws didn't bother us cattlemen. They were afraid we'd band together and give them a fight. So when they did any rustling or horse-stealing it was outside the Strip, and if they did any robbing inside, it was the settlers they picked on. But that's all changed now.

"Lambert owns a store at Sodville, and Thatcher has a saloon there. They claim to be respectable. But everybody knows Luke Thatcher is on the dodge from Texas law. As for Cleve Lambert— Well, I've never heard anything against him. He came here from Missouri. St. Louis, I heard. A couple months ago some settlers over at Beaver City held a big political meeting, and Lambert attended it. Those settlers drew up a constitution and organized what they call the Cimarron Territory. They aim to send a representative to Washington, hoping to get him seated in Congress and the Strip recognized as a territory like New Mexico and Arizona."

"That would be a good thing, wouldn't it?" Reese asked.

"I suppose so," Forbes said. "It'd mean that No Man's Land would have a governor

and courts and law officers. On the other hand, it would open the country to homesteaders, and that would mean trouble for us cattlemen. It'd be the end of the open range. So it's only the settlers that are anxious to get No Man's Land recognized by Congress. Still, we cattlemen aren't so much against it as the outlaws are."

Reese nodded his understanding of that. He could see that the lawless element would

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fight any attempt to bring law and order to what amounted to an outlaw empire. But he said, "If Lambert is crooked, how is it that he is helping the Beaver City settlers swing this thing?"

Forbes frowned, looked puzzled. "That's what has got me wondering," he said. "I figure he sees a way to profit by working with the Beaver City crowd. Lambert got himself made a member of the Territorial Council, as they call it. He's supposed to be a member repping for the western part of the Strip. When he got back to Sodville, he called a meeting and everybody around these parts was invited to attend. Some of us cattlemen went, but mostly it was a meeting of the outlaw element—as well as the gamblers, saloonmen and fancy women of Sodville. Not much came of the meeting, except that Lambert made known in a speech that he was a member of the Council and that he was appointing Luke Thatcher as a territorial marshal with the authority to keep law and order and to collect taxes."

"And you cattlemen refuse to pay taxes, eh?"

"That's it, Reese."

"So the Thatcher crowd tries to collect by force?"

"Yeah. Like you saw here this morning.

Reese watched Red Tyson mount his horse and ride out. The young cowhand's face was still stiff with anger.

The CPA man said, "You figure this tax collecting is just a scheme on the part of Lambert and Thatcher to steal from you cattlemen?"

"What else?" Forbes said. "They're demanding ten cents a head on livestock, and I've got about twenty-two hundred head in my Lazy F iron. Thatcher's men are trying to collect two hundred and twenty dollars from me. They're trying to collect from the other cattlemen too. And I've heard that they're levying on the settlers, too, the few who are located in this part of the country. Then there's the trail herds that cross No Man's Land on their way to the railroad in Kansas from Texas and New Mexico. Thatcher and his tough-hands are making the trail bosses pay a toll of ten cents a head. It's outright robbery!"

REESE could understand why the rancher was bitter about the activities of Lambert and Thatcher. It was possible that the attempt to collect taxes was merely a clever scheme of extortion. The amount of money involved—two hundred and twenty dollars, in Forbe's case — was trifling in comparison to what was often at stake in other cases handled by the CPA field chief.

But in a country like No Man's Land, a few hundred dollars was big money. If Lambert and Thatcher could collect from all the cattlemen and settlers, the so-called taxes would total to a sizable amount. And no doubt they would be collected each and every year. Yes, Lambert and Tatcher—if

they were pocketing what money they collected—were out for high stakes.

Ginny called from the house that she had the meal ready for Reese, and he crossed the yard. She said anxiously, "Did you notice if Red rode out, Mr. Reese?"

"Yes. He did ride out, Ginny."

"Which way did he go?"

"West, I think."

The girl was relieved. "I was afraid he'd followed my sister," she said. Then, forcing a smile, "He has a bad temper, and I'm afraid of what will happen if he ever catches her with Cleve Lambert. But I shouldn't worry you with our troubles, should I?" She took his arm. "Come along and eat now. You must be starved. When did you eat last?"

"The only meal I've missed was breakfast," he told her.

But Ginny was not listening. He could see that she was too worried about Red Tyson to be concerned about anything or anybody else.

The Lazy F, the Forbes ranch here on Squaw Creek was trouble-ridden, but Steve Reese could give the people no helping hand. He thanked Ginny Forbes for the meal, then went to the barn to saddle his horse. Milt Forbes was lounging in the doorway. His shotgun leaned against the wall of the barn, and he was now wearing a gun-rig. Evidently, he intended to keep watch so the tax collectors would not catch him off-guard when and if they returned.

Reese said, "I'll head for Sodville and try to find Jake Duval, Milt. There'll be a couple of riders showing up here, looking for me. A couple of CPA men. Tell them to follow me to Sodville, will you?"

Forbes nodded, and Reese went inside and saddled the buckskin.

When he rode from the barn, the rancher told him, "Watch yourself in that place, friend. Especially if you happen to run into Chris Hackett and his pardners. They'll want to pay you back for siding me against them this morning."

"I'll watch myself," Reese promised. "So long, Forbes."

He rode north across Lazy F range, following wagon tracks, passing scattered bunches of cattle. After several miles across the grass flats, he descended some bluffs and entered a stretch of rock and brush country. After perhaps a half-mile through the rough stretch, he sighted a rider coming toward him at a slow walk and soon recognized Louise Forbes.

If the girl had met Cleve Lambert, it had been a brief rendezvous. But there was a disappointed look about her, and Reese was sure that the man hadn't come to their meeting place. He felt a moment's sympathy for her; it wasn't pleasant for a girl to be in love and have her family so hostile to the man that she could not invite him to her home. On the other hand, it was too bad if Louise had fallen in love with the wrong sort of man.

He reined in as they came up with each other, removed his hat, smiled. Once again he was aware of how attractive she was. But he thought immediately that she needed to smile, to wipe away her sullen look.

SHE halted, gazed at him without much friendliness.

"I'd like to ask you a question, Miss Forbes," he said. "I've heard what your father and sister and Red Tyson think of Cleve Lambert. Now I'd like your opinion of him. Is he trustworthy, Miss Forbes?"

"Why do you concern yourself about him?"

"I may need a friend when I get to Sodville."

"What sort of a friend?" she said. "If you are like most of the men drifting about No Man's Land, you'll not find Cleve Lambert very friendly. But if you're a decent sort— Well, no matter what my family says, he is honest."

"I'm looking for a murderer. Will Lambert help me find him?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't he?"

"I've heard that it's dangerous to trust any man here in the Neutral Strip."

"You've let the others at the Lazy F Ranch make you suspicious," Louise said. "Certainly there are many dishonest men here. But Cleve Lambert is not one of them. On the contrary, he's doing his best to rid the country of such men. And it's

difficult to make any headway. I know what you're thinking—that those men who were at the ranch this morning are no better than outlaws. They are rough men, but Cleve can't find any other sort to help him. Red Tyson was a fool to quarrel with them. As for my father—he should see that everyone should pay taxes. A great deal of money is needed if the Territorial Council is to carry out its plans to get Congress to recognize Cimarron Territory."

It was evident that Cleve Lambert and his cause had one staunch follower. Reese said, "If I see Lambert, I'll tell him that you and I had a friendly talk, Miss Forbes."

She did not reply to that.

He added, "Would you like to give me a message for him?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, I'll be on my way," Reese said, and lifted the buckskin's reins.

"Wait, please!"

"Yes?"

She considered a moment, then shook her head. "Never mind," she said. "It's nothing." She flushed, bit her lower lip. "It's just that I was disappointed when he failed to meet me today. But it's all right. I know he can't always get away, that he's busy."

CHAPTER VI

Sodville

LOUISE FORBES rode on then, and as she passed Steve Reese he marveled that any man would fail to keep a date with so attractive a girl. Then he wondered, riding on, if Louise, like her sister, was in love with a man who did not return her affections.

He had not traveled far before he saw Red Tyson. The young puncher was off his horse, hunkered down in the shade of a boulder. His hat was shoved back off his bruised forehead, revealing a shaggy tuft of red hair. A cigarette drooped from his lips, the smoke from it curling lazily up over his hat brim. Reese did not need to ask what Tyson was doing there. He knew that the youth was hoping that Cleve Lambert would still show up for his rendezvous with Louise.

The CPA man reined in, hooked a leg about his saddle-horn, took out makings. After lighting his cigarette, he said, "What would it get you to gun down a man like Lambert, Red? His crowd would just make things hot for you."

"It'd make things a lot safer for a lot of people," Tyson said flatly. "He's behind all the trouble in these parts. You saw what happened at the Lazy F this morning. It'll be worse, when those hombres come back, with Luke Thatcher leading them. I've seen what that crowd did in other places. Yeah, I saw a settler they burned out over on Sand Creek. Thatcher claimed he owed forty dollars taxes. I saw Steve Barton after they beat him up. I saw them stampede a trail herd when the boss of the outfit refused to pay toll. It'd make me feel real good to settle Cleve Lambert's hash, mister, and if I figured I could get to him, I'd go gunning for him all the way to Sodville."

Reese didn't know what to say to that. There was no reasoning with a man full of hatred.

Tyson said, "You go find Duval, Reese, and let me take care of a bigger crook." He threw his cigarette away with an angry jerk of his arm. "Don't meddle in my business. You savvy?"

Reese nodded, said "Sure, Red," and straightened in the saddle.

He rode on toward Sodville.

Cleve Lambert's store towered above the rest of Sodville. It was a frame building, two stories high, with a false front. There was a wooden awning across the lower part of the front, sheltering two windows and a doorway and a display of merchandise arranged beneath the windows. Across the false-front was the legend, the handiwork of some itinerant sign painter:

LAMBERT & CO.
GENERAL MERCHANDISE

The lettering was large enough to be read from far outside town, and was done in

gaudy yellow and black. The rest of the building was unpainted, except for a smaller sign at the side, where an open stairway climbed to a second-floor door. The second sign read:

CLEVE LAMBERT
MEMBER TERRITORIAL COUNCIL
CIMARRON TERRITORY
OFFICE

Except for Lambert's building, the houses all had walls of sod and there were a half-hundred such dirt structures ranging from mere huts to the big L-shaped building bearing a crude sign that read:

THATCHER'S SALOON

It was hazy dusk and lamplight glowed from doorways and windows. A big freight rig from Kansas was unloading merchandise at a side door of Lambert's store, and a settler was carrying purchases out the front entrance to his small rig. Saddle mounts stood at most of the hitch-racks, and Steve Reese was just one of many riders drifting into the place. It appeared that Sodville was one of those rowdy towns that dozed by day and became wide-awake only after dark.

None of the other riders or any of the men along the single street gave him more than a glance. He rode through the town, then turned back to dismount before a sod building with a sign reading:

DRINKS—EATS

HE TIED his buckskin to the restaurant's hitch-rail, stepped through the open doorway, and saw a bar across the side of the place and a counter with stools across the rear. There was one empty stool at the counter, and Reese took it. The counter-man was a Mexican, and he served everybody the same meal—a platter of fried steak, beans, bread, and a cup of coffee—and said, "Four bits, mister."

Reese slid a half-dollar across the counter and began on his meal. The steak was tough, the beans cold, and the biscuits heavy. But the coffee was hot and black. The man beside Reese had finished eating and departed when the CPA man sensed somebody's gaze upon him. He looked around and saw the flabby tax collector, Chris Hackett. The fat man was staring at him from the stool beyond the vacated one.

"You get around, mister."

Reese shrugged. "It's a free country."

"Not for your kind," Hackett growled. "I warned you that nobody can get away with what you pulled."

Reese didn't want to get off onto a wrong start here in Sodville, and so he tried to placate the man. He said, trying to sound worried, "Look, I didn't mean to make trouble. I figure you were in the wrong. I didn't know until you told me that you were tax collectors. How was I to know? I just hit No Man's Land this morning."

Hackett seemed somewhat mollified. "You ain't a hired hand of Milt Forbes'?"

"Sure not. I just stopped by there hoping to get a hand-out meal."

"So? Where you from?"

"Texas."

"A big place, Texas."

Reese said, "Yeah," and smiled wryly. "A man can get in trouble in a lot of places, in Texas." He paused, eyeing Hackett covertly, hoping he was playing it properly. "Had enough trouble for a spell. Hoping to stay out of it here in No Man's Land."

Hackett no longer regarded him suspiciously, but asked, "Got friends around here?"

Reese hesitated. He could deny having any friends, and the fat man would probably think nothing of it. On the other hand, he might make use of this opportunity to get a line on the man he sought, and Hackett might be none the wiser. It was risky, for Hackett's suspicions might be aroused all over again. But he decided to take the gamble.

"An old friend of mine is here in the Strip," he said. "Don't know where, though."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know what he calls himself now."

"What did he used to call himself?"

"Duval," Reese said. "Jake Duval."

Hackett regarded him blankly, but though

his face remained expressionless, his eyes glinted with interest. He said slowly, "Heard of him. If I see him around, I'll tell him you're looking for him. What's your handle, bucko?"

"Steve Reese."

"I'll see you around, Reese," Hackett said, and lifted his bulk off the stool.

It wasn't until he was gone from the eating-place that Reese noticed that the man had left his meal half uneaten. Alarm gripped the CPA investigator. He had made a mistake by mentioning Jake Duval. Hackett's hasty departure was evidence of that. But the mistake might work out to his advantage, if the fat man was going to warn Duval.

Reese left his own meal unfinished, and reached the street just in time to see Chris Hackett—easily spotted even in the darkness because of his bulk— entering Thatcher's Saloon.

He untied his horse, led it along the street to Lambert's plank building, which was directly across from the saloon, and left it ground-hitched at the side of the store. He waited at the corner of the building, watching the entrance of the saloon. His hope was that Jake Duval would become frightened when told that somebody from Texas was inquiring about him and beat a hasty retreat from Sodville. If the man was to be taken back to Texas, he must be caught away from his friends.

PERHAPS five minutes passed, and a number of men entered and left the saloon, but none fitted Duval's description. None seemed to be in a hurry to leave the town. Growing impatient, Reese crossed the street and looked over the half-dozen horses at the saloon's hitch-rail. None was a strawberry roan but, Reese reflected, Duval might have obtained a new mount.

Reese was there by the horses when Chris Hackett came from the saloon. Hackett saw him at once, and came toward him. He was followed by two men who stepped around as though to untie their mounts.

The fat man said, "I asked around, Reese. Duval ain't been seen for more than a week."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"Last time he hit town, he stocked up on grub and whisky. He had a pack horse with him. Said that he was headed for New Mexico."

"Thanks for bothering, Hackett."

"You don't seem any too anxious to find him now, friend."

"Wasn't anxious at the start."

"No?" Hackett said, moving in close, so close that his huge paunch pushed the CPA man back against the hitch-rail. "That ain't like it seemed."

Reese's alarm returned. The two men were behind him now, and not bothering with the horses. He gave Hackett a shove, staggering him away. But then a gun jabbed him in the back. And a hand grabbed his gun from its holster.

One of the men behind him said sourly, "Take it easy, hombre, else this gun is liable to go off!"

Resistance was out of the question. An attempt to break out of this neatly sprung trap would be suicidal. Steve Reese sensed that his only chance of getting out of the jam was to play the part he assumed with Chris Hackett at the lunch counter. They might not get too rough with him so long as he pretended to be a rider who had left Texas under a cloud. And they wouldn't be able to prove that he was anything else.

Luckily, he had no identifying papers upon him. His CPA credentials were in his bedroll. He had placed them there before entering No Man's Land, and now he was thankful that he'd possessed such foresight. But he could only regret his blunder in mentioning the name Jake Duval to this fat man facing him.

Hackett said, "Somebody wants a little talk with you, Reese."

"With me?" Reese said, trying to appear bewildered. "What for?"

"You'll find out. Come along."

"Hold on, Hackett. I haven't done anything wrong here in Sodville."

The gun jabbed harder into his back, and the man behind it said, "The Territorial Marshal wants to see you, hombre. Now move!"

Hackett led the way, and the other two

kept close behind Reese. They entered Thatcher's Saloon. It was crowded with men, and mingling with them were a number of gaudily dressed percentage girls. A poker game was in progress at a table, and in a rear corner of the room a piano-player was beating a tune from his tinny-sounding instrument.

The air was hazy with tobacco smoke, and the place had the usual barroom's smell of whisky, beer, and sweat. The crowd was rowdily noisy. No one paid any attention to the CPA man and his escort.

CHAPTER VII

Territorial Marshal

REESE was taken to a back room that was furnished as an office. A man sat at a rolltop desk, and Reese recognized him as Luke Thatcher. He had once seen Thatcher in San Antonio, when the man had been a prisoner of the Texas Rangers, from whom he later escaped. Reese had also seen the man's picture on wanted dodgers.

Thatcher had grown a beard, but it did not alter his appearance to any great degree. He was a coarsely handsome man of about forty. He had a hooked nose, wide-set eyes beneath shaggy black brows. His hair was black, but his complexion had a contrasting pallor. His beard was short, curly, silky; it looked as though he gave it a lot of care.

He was writing in a ledger, and it was a full minute before he put down his pen and looked at Steve Reese. "So you're looking for Jake Duval, are you?" he said.

Reese shrugged. "I thought I'd look him up," he said. "I didn't figure it would get me in trouble.

Thatcher took a cigar from his vest pocket. When he reached for it, he pushed back his coat and revealed a badge pinned to the vest. He studied Reese as he lighted the cigar, then said, "I seem to know you from somewhere, mister."

"You ever been in Texas?"

"What part of Texas?"

"I've been in most parts of it."

"You know me?"

Reese gestured toward Hackett and the other two men. "They told me you were the Territorial Marshal," he said. "Me, I didn't know there was any law in No Man's Land. But I've got nothing to be scared of. I didn't pull anything here."

"You interfered with the Cimarron Territory's tax collectors."

"I explained to Hackett that it was a mistake."

"What were you doing at the Forbes ranch?"

"I stopped by to ask for a meal," Reese said, and hoped that his recklessness with the truth would go unnoticed. "And to ask about Jake Duval. He used to work for Milt Forbes. But Forbes told me Jake quit a couple months ago."

Thatcher puffed on his cigar, studied Reese some more. Finally he said, "Duval comes here once in a while for provisions and whisky. He never stays longer than it takes him to stock up. Then he disappears. What's he got to be scared of, Reese?"

"Search me. Maybe he's in some kind of trouble."

"Where's he getting his money?"

"I don't know. It's been a long time since I saw him."

Thatcher rose. He reached out and turned up the wick of the student lamp atop the desk, and then, with more light in the room, he stared at Reese again.

And said, "Yeah — I knew you somewhere. You want to tell me where it was?"

"I don't remember you, Marshal."

"Thatcher is the name. Luke Thatcher."

Reese tried to look none too bright. He shook his head. "I heard of a Texas hombre by that name, but he was a badman and not a lawman. No, Marshal, I don't recollect you from anywhere."

Thatcher brushed cigar ash from the lapels of his coat. He smiled without amusement. "We could talk all night like this

and not get anywhere," he said. "All right, Chris, shake him down."

Hackett turned to Reese and went through his pockets. He found nothing out of the ordinary. Tobacco sack and papers, matches, a pocket knife, a little more than eighty dollars in bills and coins, a couple of .30-30 cartridges, a bandanna handkerchief. The fat man returned the stuff to Reese's pockets, then took the CPA man's Stetson and looked inside its sweat band. He next ran his fingers inside the tops of Reese's boots.

"Not a thing," Hackett said finally. "He's clean."

LUKE THATCHER puffed on his cigar. "He'd be pretty dumb if he wasn't clean," he said. "But you're right about him. He doesn't look like a hombre on the dodge, somehow. And like you said, he could be a Pinkerton."

Reese looked surprised. "Me, a Pinkerton detective?"

Thatcher shrugged. "It could be," he said. "No regular lawman from outside can operate in the Strip. But the Pinkerton Agency sends its men everywhere. I heard lately that Charley Siringo was operating in these parts not long ago." He turned to the desk, placed his cigar on an ashtray. Then he said: "We don't want them snooping around now that we've got our own law officers. We know how they operate. They pick up a man's trail and all of a sudden he disappears. That's not legal, Reese, taking a man out of Cimarron Territory without proper authority."

"I guess not," Reese said. "But I don't know anything about it."

"I think you know plenty," Thatcher said. "Hold him, boys."

The two men behind Reese caught him by the arms and held him securely. Thatcher drove a fist into the CPA man's middle, just above the belt. The breath puffed out of Reese, and his knees buckled. He would have fallen had the two hardcases let loose of him. He gasped, choked.

"What do you want with Jake Duval?" Thatcher demanded.

[*Turn page*]

"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"
"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND
America's Favorite Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN
GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF
LOW AS 29¢ PLUS TAX
KRAMER KELLER

"Nothing. I told you that."

Thatcher hit him again, this time to the jaw, and Reese's head rocked back and his brain reeled.

"What's Duval scared of?"

"I don't know."

"Where's he getting his money?"

Reese shook his head, and Thatcher's fist slammed into him again.

"What do you Pinkertons want with him?"

"I'm no Pinkerton," Reese said, and there was rage in his voice now.

He kicked out as Thatcher aimed another punch at him, and the toe of his boot caught the big man in the groin. Thatcher yelped with pain and bent double, reeled all the way across the room to slam against the wall. Reese ripped loose of the two men holding him, but was free only a moment. Hackett threw his bulk at him, and kept him busy until the other two recovered and could grapple with the CPA man.

It was a wild mêlée for a moment, then the door opened and a man shouted something that caused Reese's attackers to withdraw. By now Reese was backed into a corner of the room, and, though still able to fight, he had no real chance of escaping.

He looked at the man who entered, a tall blondish man wearing a finely tailored gray broadcloth suit and a pearl-gray Stetson. A handsome man, clean-cut. He was frowning with displeasure. Evidently he had some influence over these hardcases, for even Luke Thatcher, now recovering from the kick, eyed him with a measure of respect. And Steve Reese knew that this must be Cleve Lambert.

"What's going on here, Marshal?"

"It's like this, Mr. Lambert—" Hackett began.

Thatcher cut him short. "I've reason to believe that this man is a Pinkerton operative," he said flatly. "He interfered with Hackett this morning when Chris and some of our men were trying to collect tax from a rancher. Then he showed up here and claimed to be looking for a man named Jake Duval."

Cleve Lambert stared at Reese, frowning. "What does he claim to be?"

"A hombre on the dodge," Thatcher said. "But he's lying."

"Why would Pinkerton detectives interfere with our tax collecting, Marshal?"

Thatcher shrugged. "Maybe some of the ranchers hired that outfit to fight us," he said. "You know how it is with the cattlemen. They don't like this country to be organized into a Territory."

REESE was sizing up Lambert, but he didn't know what to make of him. He had the manner of an honest man, but his connection with a crowd of toughs led by an outlaw like Thatcher didn't speak well for him.

Reese said, "I didn't know what Hackett and his pardners were up to. I thought they were bandits. They were getting rough with the people at the Forbes ranch and—"

He broke off, watching to see how Lambert took that.

Lambert gave a start. "The Forbes ranch?" he said. He looked at Chris Hackett. "You had trouble with Milt Forbes?"

Hackett nodded. "He wouldn't pay up," he said. "And that hired hand, Red Tyson, got tough. Then Reese showed up and got the drop on us. We had to pull out. And Forbes still owes the Cimarron Territory treasury two hundred and twenty dollars."

Lambert looked somewhat upset, and Reese knew that he was thinking of Louise Forbes and wondering if the trouble Hackett had caused at the Lazy F would turn the girl against him.

Lambert said, "Are you a Pinkerton detective, Reese?"

"No."

"And you've not been brought in by the ranchers, as Thatcher suspects?"

"No," Reese said. "I came into No Man's Land on my own."

"What do you want with this man Duval?"

Reese thought it safer to lie again. "I used to know him down in Texas."

Luke Thatcher swore. "Cleve, I think he's lying," he said. "Maybe the ranchers didn't bring him in to buck us. But he's up to something. This Duval is a queer one. He used to work for Milt Forbes as a cowhand.

Then all of a sudden he quits his job and disappears. The only time anybody sees him is when he comes to Sodville to stock up on grub and whisky. The last time he was here he paid for a jug of whisky in my place with a twenty-dollar gold piece. And my bartender told me that Duval had a big poke. Now where did a cowhand without a job come by a lot of money here in No Man's Land? I figure we should know about Duval—and this Reese is the one to tell us!"

Lambert shook his head. "I don't see how it concerns us, unless Duval has robbed somebody. And so far as I know, no robbery has been reported. I don't like your methods, Marshal. Beating a man to make him talk is no good. As for Reese, he doesn't strike me as a man who can be forced to talk." He turned to Reese, and added, "I'd like to talk to you alone. How about coming along to my office?"

Reese smiled. "It'd be a pleasure," he drawled. Whatever Cleve Lambert was, the man had saved him from a bad beating. He moved out from the corner, faced the tough who had taken his gun. "Hand it over," Reese ordered.

The man cocked an inquiring eye at Luke Thatcher, and the outlaw turned marshal said harshly, "Give it to him."

With his Colt back, Reese felt a lot better and he promised himself that he wouldn't be caught off guard again while in Sodville. And as he turned toward the door, the CPA man saw a calculating look in Luke Thatcher's eyes that told him he would need to be on guard. Thatcher and his toughs weren't through with him.

They wanted to know all they could about Jake Duval.

And Duval's money.

Cleve Lambert's office was comfortably furnished, more like a study than a place to transact business. There was a bookcase with well-filled shelves. There was a big map of No Man's Land on the wall behind the desk. There were easy chairs and a sofa. Red Brussels carpet covered the floor. Lambert took Reese's hat, told him to sit down, offered him a cigar from a humidor. When the CPA man said that he would smoke a cigarette, Lambert went to a liquor cabinet and filled two small glasses.

"Port wine," he told Reese, handing him a glass. "I don't drink or stock anything stronger. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Reese said. "Your health, Mr. Lambert."

"Yours," said Lambert.

THEY sipped the wine, Reese lounging in an armchair and Lambert seated at the desk.

Reese said, "You're a man of unusual tastes, for this country. I didn't expect to see a room like this."

Lambert smiled thinly. "I've a dual nature," he said. "I was reared in a city and like to live like a city man. At the same time I have a yen for pioneering. That complicates my life for me, I admit. I'm often in conflict with myself." He leaned back in his chair, lighted a cigar. "Most men in Sodville would laugh at such talk. You don't. Evidently you are a man of understanding."

"I've been around," Reese said. "I'm not exactly a simple man, myself. I should thank you for getting me out of Thatcher's office. Things were beginning to get a little rough. That's a tough crowd you've appointed to be the marshal and tax collectors."

"A rough country, rough men," Lambert said offhand.

"And rough measures, friend."

"Which I regret," Lambert said. "But in time all that will change. This is a period of transition for the Neutral Strip, and of course there is—well, unrest. But I'm hopeful that before long Cimarron Territory will become a fact—a reality and not just a dream. Then with law and order, we'll be able to forego rough measures."

"Once men like Thatcher are in the saddle, it's hard to unseat them."

"Oh, I think Thatcher is a good man, basically."

"You should ask the Texas Rangers about him."

"What do you mean by that, Reese?" Lambert said quickly.

Reese smiled, and said, "A word to the wise, Lambert."

CHAPTER VIII

Rough Country—Rough Men

PUFFING on his cigarette, Reese studied Cleve Lambert, not knowing what to make of him. He was impressed by Lambert's air of respectability. But it could be a pose; the man might be a clever actor. In his police detective days, Reese had encountered confidence men who seemed as respectable as church deacons while they swindled widows out of insurance money. It was quite possible that Cleve Lambert was in his way as dishonest as Luke Thatcher.

Lambert was studying Reese in turn, and said, "Let's get back to you, Reese. I'm curious about you. Are you a Pinkerton detective, as Thatcher thinks?"

"If I was, would I tell you any quicker than I'd tell Thatcher?"

"I hope so. After all, you have no reason to fear me."

"Only in that you're bossing that tough crowd," Reese told him. "But I give you my word. I'm not a Pinkerton detective. No one in No Man's Land brought me here to buck your Cimarron Territory scheme. My business here doesn't concern you or Luke Thatcher."

"And you won't tell me what your business is?"

Reese rose and deadened his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk, then stood there looking down at Lambert.

"Like I said, I was at Milt Forbes' Lazy F Ranch when your men tried to make him pay two hundred and twenty dollars for what they called taxes. I saw how they work. Red Tyson told me that Thatcher and his toughs are pulling that rough stuff all over the western part of No Man's Land. Beating men who won't pay up, burning out settlers, stampeding trail herds. Milt Forbes figures it's just a scheme on the part of you and Thatcher to fill your own pockets. I imagine the other ranchers figure the same way. So—"

Lambert cut in, "The tax money will go to the Territorial treasury, no matter what anybody thinks."

"Still, violence is being used," Reese went on. "So why should I trust you when you're boss of the crowd that's doing the violence?"

"I'm not aware that violence is being done."

"I am," Reese said, and saw the man squirm uneasily. "I witnessed it at the Lazy F. Red Tyson was gun-whipped. He puts the blame on you, and if you had shown up this morning, to meet Louise Forbes, Tyson would have killed you." He now saw Lambert wince. "Violence was done me over in Thatcher's place, as you well know. It seems to me, friend, that you're one of those people who see only what they want to see."

Lambert took the cigar from his mouth, gazed at it as though it suddenly tasted bad. Then he put it down, and got from his chair and faced Reese.

"I invited you here," he said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't submit to this sort of abuse."

"It's not abuse, Lambert. I'm just telling you why I'm afraid to trust you."

"And I admit that you have a strong case against me."

"I'm just presenting the evidence," Reese said. "I'm not judging you. In fact, one part of my mind tells me to ignore the evidence and trust you. Another part warns me not to gamble on you. However, I've already played my cards wrong since coming to Sodville. You know that I'm hunting Jake Duval."

"I don't know the man. But I'm not unwilling to help you find him—if you have a legitimate reason for it."

"He murdered a man down at Garrity, Texas, two months ago."

"Then you're a Texas lawman, are you?"

"I'm an investigator for the Cattlemen's Protective Association," Reese said. "A member of the Association was arrested, tried and found guilty of the murder that Duval committed. He's to be hanged on the thirteenth of the month. That's my reason for finding Jake Duval. And it would be a legitimate reason anywhere except in No

Man's Land. But this is a sanctuary for murderers and other criminals, and even if I locate my man, it will be a problem to get him back to Texas."

LAMBERT smiled faintly. "Now I can prove to you that I am in earnest about bringing law and order to this country. I'll do all I can to help you find Duval."

"How?"

"By having Luke Thatcher, the Territorial marshal, cooperate with you."

Reese shook his head. "That's what I don't want," he said. "Thatcher was trying to make me tell him about Duval when you showed up at his office. He knew that Duval has a lot of money and is scared. He wanted me to tell how Duval got hold of that money. And I've a hunch that he'll start a search of his own for the man, because of the money, and also try to keep me from finding him."

"You've a suspicious nature, Reese,"

HANK BALL

Lambert said. "If Thatcher knew about Duval's having a large amount of money and wants to get his hands on it, why didn't he try to find the man long ago?"

"He'd heard from his bartender that Duval had some money," Reese said. "But maybe he didn't think it was enough to bother about. Or maybe he was going to pull something the next time Duval came to town. But tonight, because of me, he got really interested. He's convinced now that Duval had enough money to make it worth his while to sit in the game."

"You're guessing, Reese."

"Yeah, I'm guessing now how I'm going to get out of town without trouble," Reese said. "Without having to fight Thatcher and his tough-hands."

He went ot the window, looked down into the street.

Three men were standing in front of the saloon opposite, and though they were in the shadows, the CPA field chief recognized the bulky figure of Chris Hackett. He told Lambert to come and take a look. Lambert obeyed, and a scowl darkened his handsome face.

"It seems you're right," he said. "They're waiting for you."

"Sure. Thatcher doesn't want me to get to Duval."

"I'll go have a talk with him."

"I'd rather you stay with me, friend."

Lambert gave him an angry look. "Very well," he said. "But what will you do?"

Reese shrugged. "Shoot my way out, if I must," he said. "My horse is in the alleyway at the side of your building opposite the stairway. Maybe they haven't spotted it. If I can reach it—" He studied Lambert. He still did not know what to make of the man, but now he had to trust him to a certain extent.

"Is there a way out of here other than by that door and the outside steps?" he asked.

"There's an inside stairs down into the store," Lambert said. "Come along."

He turned to a door across the room. Reese started to follow him, but then the map on the wall caught his eye and he went to it. Lambert returned, stood beside him. Reese found the location of Sodville and drew an imaginery circle about it with his forefinger.

"All this is grassland except to the west?"

"That's right."

Reese pointed to a spot to the west of Sodville's location. It was marked: *"El Brenoso* (Badlands)" and was a series of wavy lines. "Rough country?"

Lambert nodded. "Rock and brush," he said. "You think Duval may be hiding there?"

"It seems likely," Reese said. "Thatcher and Hackett claim that Duval comes in for provisions. That means he's not far from Sodville. And since he's scared, he'd be holed up in some lonely country. This Brenoso country is about twenty miles from Sodville, if your map is accurate. Yeah, there's a chance of finding him out there." He swung away from the map. "Let's go, Lambert!"

They passed through a bedroom and then an unfurnished room. It was dark in this part of the building. And in the store below when they descended the stairs. They felt their way into a stockroom and across it to a door opening into the narrow alleyway where Reese had left his horse. Lambert eased the door open as quietly as possible.

"Luck to you, Reese," he said.

REESE said, "Thanks," and wondered if the man really meant his words. It was possible that he would never know whether Cleve Lambert was a crook with a falsefront of respectability or an honest man who had foolishly got himself involved with a band of crooks. On that thought, the CPA man plunged out into the dark alleyway.

He made it to his horse without being seen by the men over by the saloon, but then the buckskin was spooked by his sudden appearance and began to shy away from him. The animal pranced out of the alleyway before he caught hold of its reins.

And one of the three men watching for him shouted, "There he is!"

They came running as Reese swung to the saddle.

He wheeled the buckskin about, gave it spurs, headed it into the alleyway.

Behind him a gun blasted.

Reese heard the shriek of the slug. A miss, that first shot. But his back seemed an easy target, and he was sure that the next shot would find its mark. But when it crashed, it also missed him. Then he was out of the alleyway and swinging around behind Lambert's building. He kept the buckskin running, headed south, and for a moment he thought he was safe.

Then he heard a drumming of hoofs behind him and, glancing back, he saw a bunch of riders—at least a half-dozen—coming from the town.

The buckskin was running strongly, and Reese decided to try to outrun his pursuers. There was no immediate hope of losing them. There was bright moonlight, and since he was able to see them they could see him. He continued south, in the direction of the Lazy F, not because he meant to seek sanctuary there, but because there was a chance that his partners, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, had arrived at the ranch and were now on their way toward Sodville. If he met the pair, the odds wouldn't be evened but they would be cut down to a point where a fight could be attempted.

He covered perhaps a mile without lengthening his lead, and he began to fear that at least several of his pursuers were as well mounted as he. It was a grueling pace, and gradually the buckskin's stride began to falter. Reese peered ahead but saw nothing but undulating prairie. He was far from the stretch of rough country he had passed through on his way north from the Lazy F. There was no cover at all, and so if he must stand and make a fight of it, not even the terrain would favor him.

The buckskin's sides were pumping like a bellows, and Reese shot another glance back. Two of the riders were gaining. In fact, they were now within rifle range. He would be an easy target for them if he continued, and so he reined the buckskin to a rearing halt and, grabbing his Winchester from its boot, dropped from the saddle. He threw himself to the grass in a prone shooting position, levered a cartridge into the firing chamber, and squeezed out a shot that brought the two foremost horsemen to an abrupt halt.

They returned his fire, using their saddle-guns, shooting as rapidly as they could work lever and trigger. Reese took aim this time, and with his second shot knocked one of the pair from saddle. The other rider wheeled

his mount, rode out of range. Reese jacked another cartridge into the chamber, then began crawling rapidly through the high grass. His hope was that they would expect him to remain close to his horse.

The fleeing rider joined with the others, and Reese, still crawling, could hear their angry voices. They had halted out there, and were sensibly reluctant to ride in toward the spot where they believed him to be.

Reese continued to snake his way through the grass, and he was a hundred yards or more away from his horse when the Sodville men began a wild shooting at the spot where he'd last been sighted. He finally rolled into a small arroyo and by keeping bent over he could move at a run without exposing himself above its banks. There was still heavy shooting far behind him. The arroyo was taking him farther south, and finally he came erect and continued at a dog-trot. He could see guns flashing in the distance when he looked back.

HE HALTED and caught his breath, and the racketing gunfire suddenly halted. Reese chuckled, thinking that the hardcases had finally discovered that their quarry had slipped away. Then he sobered, aware that they would now start searching for him. Or, if they were smart, they would spread a net for him and drag it in when daylight came. They should figure out that a man afoot couldn't travel fast. But it might be that they wouldn't be patient enough to wait until morning and then hunt him down.

He waited a minute or two longer, then started out at an easy run again. He'd traveled perhaps a quarter of a mile when he heard riders ahead. He dropped down, thinking that some of them must have circled around ahead of him while the others did the shooting. But then he heard the riders, though he still did not see them, and they were talking casually as they rode along at a slow walk. They were no manhunters.

They were soon close enough for Reese to hear one man saying something about the other's cigar, complaining about its foul odor. The voice and the complaint were familiar to the CPA field chief, and he rose and saw them a hundred feet away.

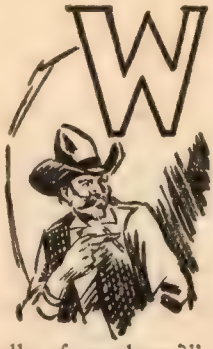
Hank Ball and Dusty Trail.

He called out, "Hank, you red-headed galoot! Dusty, you over-weight buckaroo!"

They reined in, both uttering a surprised "Doc!"

CHAPTER IX

Just Call Me Smith



WITH a laugh, Reese walked toward his two aides with his rifle in the bend of his left arm. He reached up and grasped Dusty's hand.

The pudgy ex-cowhand with the cigar jutting from his cherubic face said, "Doc, what are you doing here, afoot, in the middle of nowhere?"

"A little trouble. Which makes me plenty glad to see you two."

Hank was down off his horse, and Reese turned to shake hands with him. He was a tall, lean, strikingly handsome redhead. Like Dusty, he once had been a cowhand and now was a clever CPA investigator. Both had a knack for such work, and Reese had developed it by carefuly training them. They were invaluable partly because they fitted so well in any part of the cow country. When need be, they passed for drifting cowhands and it was seldom that anyone took them for anything else.

Hank said, "You smell us coming, Doc? That rope Dusty is smoking sure does smell to high heaven, I know."

"More'n likely it was perfume Doc smelled," Dusty retorted. "Doc, this guy's been up to his old tricks. Flirting with that dark-haired filly at the Forbes ranch. Every time that redhead sees a skirt, he—" He broke off abruptly. Then, in a whisper: "Somebody coming. Trouble, Doc?"

"Trouble is right," Reese said grimly. "A bunch of toughs followed me away from Sodville and I couldn't outrun them. I've been playing hide-and-seek with them for an hour or more."

Dusty dismounted, dropped his cigar, stepped on it. He got his rifle off his saddle, and said, "Well, let's give them a nice warm welcome."

Two riders were approaching at a slow walk, searching the grass for their elusive quarry. They hadn't yet sighted the three CPA men when Reese startled them by calling out:

"All right, buckos. The fun is over. Drop your guns!"

They reined in, and one said, "He's got somebody with him!"

"That's right," Reese told them. "And we've got the pair of you beaded!"

For a moment he thought that they would submit to being disarmed and relieved of their mounts. But they were typical No Man's Land toughs. They opened fire. Reese jerked his rifle up, but there was no need for him to shoot. The Sodville men were targeted by Hank and Dusty, one of them dead before he fell to the grass and the other wounded in the right shoulder.

As the shooting ended, voices lifted in the distance.

"That'll bring the rest of them," Reese said. "Four of five of them."

"Not enough to scare us," Hank drawled.

"They sure must want you bad, Doc," Dusty said.

Reese didn't answer. He ran to the wounded man and ordered him to get down off his horse and lie in the grass. The fellow obeyed willingly enough; he was in pain, and losing a lot of blood. Reese saw two bunches of riders coming across the moonlit flats. There were more of them than he had figured. Four men were in the one bunch, three in the other. Reese rejoined his partners, and they lay flat in the grass and beaded the approaching horsemen with their rifles.

"What's it all about, Doc?" Dusty asked.

"It's a long story," Reese replied. "In a word, this crowd has orders to gun me down so that I can't get to a man I've got to find."

Hank Ball cut in, "They're within range, Doc."

Reese said, "Maybe we can scare them off. Give them a few warning shots!"

The two groups had joined, and seven men in a bunch made an easy target. But Reese was always reluctant to see men die, even such wayward men as these outlaws of No Man's Land. They fired together, each of the three CPA men firing several shots over the heads of the horsemen. The Sodville toughs came to a quick stop, their horses rearing and milling.

Reese put down his rifle, cupped his hands to his mouth, and shouted, "Hackett! You there, Hackett?"

THERE was a moment of excited jabbering among the seven, then the fat man called:

"What do you want, Reese? You had your chance to talk your way out of this tight back in Thatcher's office. But you wouldn't take it. Now it's too late." His show of bravado didn't quite come off. There was anxiety in his voice as he asked, "Who are these hombres with you? More Pinkertons?"

"We're not Pinkerton detectives," Reese called back. "But we're after Jake Duval, just like you and Thatcher figured."

He decided to try a deception. He had failed to fool fat Chris Hackett before, but there always had to be a first time.

"These boys just brought word as to where Duval is," he added. "Some more of my partners have him trapped down in the Texas Panhandle, and we're heading for there now. It won't do you any good to try to stop us. It'll do you plenty of harm. We've downed two of your men here, and we can drop plenty more of you if you want a fight. You'd better go tell Luke Thatcher that Duval is beyond his reach."

Hackett didn't reply to that immediately. There was some discussion among his crowd, and Reese knew that at least a couple of them had no stomach for a fight against three ready guns. He was right. Two men suddenly wheeled their mounts and rode back the way they had come, and a moment later two more followed them. Only Hackett and two others remained.

Reese called to him, "There's a wounded man here, Hackett. You'd better take him to Sodville with you, if you're going. Or if you want to fight, get at it. But you'd be

loco to get yourself killed for a no-good like Luke Thatcher."

"All right," Hackett replied. "I guess you hold the winning hand."

"We'll send him out to you," Reese told him. Then, to Hank Ball, "Get that wounded man on his horse, will you? Dusty and I will keep those three covered."

The Sodville man with the bullet-hole in his shoulder didn't need much help. Hank caught up the man's horse, held it while the wounded hardcase mounted.

The man said, "What about Pete's body?" And Hank told him, "It can be picked up tomorrow. Send a wagon out for it."

A couple of minutes later the last of the bunch was riding away, Hackett leaving without more talk. Reese was beginning to hope that the fat man had fallen for his story about Duval being in Texas and trapped. If Hackett was convinced of that and made Luke Thatcher believe it, the danger would be considerably lessened when Reese and his companions searched for Duval in the badlands called *El Brenoso*.

The CPA men were able to keep Hackett and his companions in sight for some time, since it was moonlight, and the four—like the others who had pulled out—rode steadily in the direction of Sodville. When they were finally lost to his sight, Steve Reese went after the horse of the dead Sodville man.

"My own bronc is somewhere around here," he said. "Unless those hardcases took it with them. We'll try to find it and then we're heading west."

Dusty and Hank mounted, and the three of them rode warily north. A half-hour later, they sighted Reese's buckskin and he got back into his own saddle. They turned south again for a couple of miles, just in case Hackett had left one or more of his men behind somewhere to spy on them, then they swung west. Reese was fairly sure that no one was trailing them.

They traveled at an easy lope for several miles, then slowed to a walk and Reese told his fellow investigators why he was searching for Jake Duval. He began with his visit to the prison, to Dan Norman in the death cell, and ended up with telling of his talk

[*Turn page*]

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with Cleve Lambert and his flight from Sodville.

DUSTY TRAIL said, "Queer hombres here in No Man's Land. Tax collectors where there's no legal government. A Texas badman acting as a peace officer. And that Lambert dude—acting like an honest man and at the same time backing up that tough crowd."

"Well, so long as they don't get on our trail," Reese said, "they're no concern of ours. No matter how much cleaning up No Man's Land needs, our job is to save a man from the gallows. And we can do that only by finding that tricky Jake Duval."

"Don't worry, Doc," Dusty said. "We'll smoke him out."

"Yeah," Hank said, chuckling, "we'll send Dusty into the badlands with one of his stogies, and Duval will be smoked out, all right."

"I can stand the smoke of a good cigar like mine a lot easier than some of the hot air you keep spouting when nobody asks your opinion," Dusty said. "Doc, for once and for all, let's settle this argument. If you agree with the redhead that my cigars are as bad as he says, I'll quit smoking. If you agree with me that they're as fragrant as a pretty gal's perfume, then he'll have to quit complaining about 'em. What do you say, Doc?"

Reese laughed. "I'm not saying," he said. "Without your cigars, you'd be only half a man. And if Hank had nothing to belly-ache about, he'd be plumb unhappy. So I'm not telling what I think of your cigars, Dusty."

"That's the kind thing," Hank Ball said. "No use hurting his feelings, Doc."

Dusty merely grunted. It was seldom he had the last word with Hank.

It was long past midnight when they reached the edge of *El Brenoso,* a Spanish term for craggy, brushy country. They halted at the base of some bluffs to rest their horses and to watch their back-trail for signs of pursuers. When Reese was satisfied that no one was following him, he said, "Let's have a smoke and figure out our next move."

Hank said, "I'll have a look around from the top of the bluffs."

He dismounted, climbed on foot, and it was nearly a half an hour before he returned. "A hard climb, that." He was out of breath, puffing. "Sighted a speck of light to the southwest, Doc. Could be a campfire."

Reese nodded. We'll head that way," he said.

The country was so rough that it took them nearly an hour to sight the light that Hank had seen. They rounded a jumble of rocks, coming suddenly upon it. A campfire. It was dying down now, and soon would be but a handful of embers. They halted, and Reese dismounted and went on afoot. He approached the fire as stealthily as a bushwhacking Indian, and shortly was near enough to see that it was a one-man camp. Two horses were staked out nearby, but Reese supposed that one was used as a pack-animal. Anyway, just one man was bedded down by the fire.

Reese moved in close, said, "Wake up, friend. You've got visitors."

The man leaped from his blankets, gun in hand.

Reese dived at him to keep him from shooting.

He was an old man, but boot tough. Reese slammed into him and kept him from firing, but the old rannihan rapped the CPA man alongside the head with the barrel of the revolver. Reese grunted with pain, staggered under the blow, but recovered and managed to wrench the weapon out of the man's hand.

He tried to step back, but was caught in a bear-hug. He was lifted and thrown bodily, and a boot thudded into his side as he hit the ground. He rolled away from a second kick, leaped to his feet and flung the captured gun from him. He braced himself for the man's rush, then drove a fist to his grizzled face.

The old man fell to his knees.

Reese said, "Take it easy, friend. I mean you no harm."

Hank and Dusty came in at a gallop, the redhead leading Reese's horse. They dismounted and came to stand over the old-timer, but he looked up at them with defiant

eyes. And said, "Pinkertons?"

Reese knew that he was looking at another wasted life. An old man like this on the dodge, existing like a hunted animal.

The CPA field chief had no idea of what the man's crime was, but he felt sorry for him. He said, "No, we're not Pinkerton detectives. I said we mean you no harm. Come on. Get off your knees. Build up your fire and fill your coffee pot. Then we'll talk."

The man obeyed, moving with a creaky slowness. When the fire blazed up, Reese saw that he was gray and gaunt. But though he was still a tough one to handle, the piled-up years had robbed him of the mean streak that had brought him to his present sorry state.

He chuckled as he put the coffee pot on the fire, and said, "Gave you a fight, didn't I? And you only half my age!"

Reese grinned. "You did that, friend. What's your name?"

"Why, I don't know that I recollect. Just call me Smith, eh?"

"How do you manage to keep body and soul together out here, Smith?"

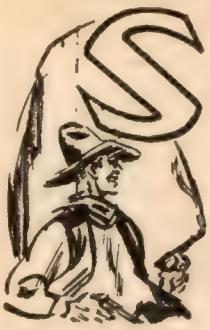
"I do odd jobs when I can find 'em," the old man said. "Do a little hunting too. Got a daughter back East, and she sends me tobacco money. A fine girl, Jennie. Me, I've got a grandson too. Seven years old." Smith's face clouded. "Always wanted to see the youngster before I cashed in my chips, but— Well, I reckon I'll never make it."

"On account of the law?"

"Well, it could be, unless the badge-toters have forgot me," Smith said. "But it's a matter of money for the train fare. At my age, I don't ever figure to come by a couple of hundred dollars— Reckon that coffee is cooked, boys."

CHAPTER X

Killer's Hideout



SMITH had only one tin cup, but the CPA men found some empty tin cans lying about the camp and used them for cups. Reese was thoughtful as he sipped the hot, black coffee, and finally asked.

"Been here in the *Brenoso* country long, Smith?"

"A couple years."

"How'd you like to earn the train fare East, so you can see your grandson."

Smith eyed the CPA field chief with sudden suspicion. "How would I earn it?" he demanded. "What would I have to do?"

"You know a man named Jake Duval?"

"Maybe."

"Help us locate him tomorrow and I'll see hat you get the fare," Reese said.

"You're Pinkertons!"

"No. I told you we weren't."

"Then you're lawmen!"

Reese frowned. The old man was turning hostile. Like all his kind, it was against his warped principles to turn a wanted man over to the law. Looking him straight in the eye, Reese said:

"You ever murder a man, Smith? You ever bushwhack a man and rob his body?"

"Not me. What kind of a hombre do you take me for?"

"Duval killed a man in cold blood, stole his money," Reese said. "But that's only a part of it. Another man is going to the gallows for that murder. On the thirteenth of this month. Unless my partners and I find Jake Duval."

"You'll never find him, mister."

"Why not?"

"Most wanted men feel safe when they reach No Man's Land," Smith said. "Except that sometimes they worry about the Pinkertons. But Duval's not like that. He's scared. Scared of everybody. He's been packing in grub for quite a while. He

Next Issue

THE CACTUS JUMPER

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Featuring Steeve Reese

should have a cache that'll last him six months. And he's holed up in a spot that's plenty hard to find. I wouldn't know where it is, only I got curious and spied on him the last time he packed in provisions. No, you'll never find him, mister."

Reese frowned, a little worried. He knew why Duval was scared and why the man had gone into hiding in the rough country. It wasn't that he feared that Texas lawmen would be after him. It was doubtful that he was afraid of the Pinkerton detectives. After all, only one man had spotted him near the scene of Frank Venable's murder—and Duval knew that that man, Mike Hurley didn't know him.

Duval was afraid of his own kind. He lived in fear that he would be killed for his loot, just as he had killed Frank Venable. Reese did not believe that the man was so well-hidden that he could not be found by determined searchers with plenty of time. But if Dan Norman was to be saved, there was very little time.

Reese said, "How would you like to save that innocent man from the gallows, Smith? And earn enough money to make that trip East to see your grandson?"

"I ain't no squealer, mister."

"No. But you've got to consider one thing."

"Eh? What's that?"

"Duval may get the idea that you're dangerous to him," Reese said. "He may start wondering why you're here in the *Brenoso,* and worry about it. In that case, your life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime. And you'd never get to see that grandson of yours."

Smith rubbed his bristly chin. "Something to what you say, mister." He eyed Reese slyly. "How can I be sure you'd give me the money?"

The CPA field chief smiled, knowing that he had won. "I'll give you two hundred dollars to take us to Duval's hide-out," he said. He dug into his pocket, brought out what money he carried. "I'll give you eighty dollars now. And the rest after we've caught that killer."

Smith reached for the money.

Reese gave it to him, and asked, "How far to where Duval is hiding?"

"Six, seven miles."

"Let's get started."

IT MAY have been only six or seven miles as a crow flies, but the trip seemed twice that long to Steve Reese and his two aides. In fact, Hank Ball said finally, "You sure we're not being taken on a wild goose chase, Doc?" And for once Dusty Trail was in agreement with the lanky redhead, saying, "If he takes us much farther, we'll be back in Texas."

Actually, Smith was guiding them as expertly as was possible at night and through such broken country. There was no beaten trail, of course. They had to find their way through difficult rocky stretches, through brush thickets, across high craggy bluffs. And dawn was not far off when Smith reined in, and whispered:

"Easy now. This is it."

They were at the edge of another brush thicket, a dense growth as high as the head of a mounted man, and it covered many acres. Beyond it was another range of bluffs. Reese stared at the old man.

"This may be it," he said. "But where's the hide-out?"

"We have to go afoot," the old man said.

They dismounted, left their horses, carried their saddle-guns. Duval would not be easily taken, Reese knew. It was possible that the man couldn't be taken alive. And dead, the CPA man thought bitterly, Duval would be of little use in saving Dan Norman.

They followed Smith into the junglelike thicket, thorny branches ripping at them and snaky tendrils of wild grapevine catching at their arms and legs and sometimes at their throats. The sky was graying with dawn when they broke through the brush and came up against the rocky base of the bluffs.

Smith led the way along the rocks to a narrow break in the cliffs. It was only wide enough for them to pass through in single file, and so well-hidden that Reese wondered how Jake Duval had found it in the beginning.

"What's beyond," Reese asked in a whisper.

"A box canyon," Smith replied.

"And Duval's there?"

"If he's not pulled out during the past week."

"Where are his horses?"

"He keeps them south of here in another canyon," the old man replied. "He can't take them through this cut. I'm not telling you wrong, mister. I spied on him, and I saw him disappear through here. He packed his provisions in on his back. And I'm betting he's still holed up inside."

"Well, we'll soon find out," Reese said. "Let's go."

Smith shook his head. "You first," he said. "I'm staying in the rear from now on. There's apt to be shooting, and I don't want any part of it."

Reese didn't argue. He turned into the cut and after the first fifty feet it widened somewhat and when he reached its far end it was about ten feet across. Beyond was a small canyon—and a crude rock-walled house with a brush roof. The house was hardly bigger inside, Reese judged, than Dan Norman's prison cell.

Hank and Dusty joined him, but Smith remained in the pass for safety.

The rock house was windowless, and its one door was a cowhide stretched on a crude frame. The door was closed. At a nod from their chief, Hank and Dusty moved silently toward the house and each took up a position at a front corner of it. Reese left his rifle propped against a boulder. He drew his revolver and moved toward the door. None of them had made a sound, but something, perhaps the sharpened intuition of a frightened man, warned Jake Duval.

He shouted, "Who's out there?"

Reese leaped out of direct range of the door, and not an instant too soon. Duval followed his shout with a shot, a blind shot. The slug tore through the cowhide. Reese flattened himself against the front wall, faced the door. Three more shots blasted within the house, and then the CPA field chief heard the trapped man begin cursing.

THIS was not working out as Reese had hoped. He had planned to enter the house and catch his man asleep. Now there seemed little chance of taking Duval alive. Except by laying siege to the place until Duval was forced by hunger, thirst or despair to surrender. And a siege would take days. It would mean sending either Hank or Dusty out for provisions. They could not wait for Duval to give up, for every day that passed brought Dan Norman a day closer to the gallows.

It was Dusty Trail who hit upon a way to force Duval into the open. The pudgy rider said, "Let's smoke him out, Doc."

He lighted a match and, by doing some stretching, he could reach up to the brush roof of the house. He touched the flame of the match to a bit of overhanging brush, and it caught fire like tinder. In a few minutes the roof was a mass of flame and smoke rolled skyward.

Reese moved closer to the door, and he was ready when the burning roof collapsed with an explosive crash. The man inside screamed, and an instant later the door was jerked open and Duval leaped into the open. Reese thrust out a foot and tripped him, then leaped after him as Duval sprawled to the ground.

Reese kicked the gun from the man's hand and covered him with his own weapon. Duval writhed on the ground, for his shirt was aflame. He had been carrying a pair of saddlebags but had lost his hold on them. Hank and Dusty came running. They slapped at Duval's burning shirt, then caught him by the arms and hoisted him to his feet.

But Jake Duval wasn't so easily taken.

He fought like a wild animal. Breaking free, he lunged at Steve Reese and tried to grab the gun from his hand.

Duval got a hold on the barrel of the Colt and nearly wrenched it from Reese's hand. The man's desperation gave him strength out of all proportion to his size. Reese drove a blow to his jaw, but Duval merely grunted under the impact. They reeled one way and another, fighting for the gun, and such was the fury of the struggle that for a time Dusty and Hank could not help their chief.

Then Reese was gripped by a desperation of his own, well aware that if Duval got possession of the gun he would be the man's first target. He drove another punch to

Duval's face, this one with all his weight behind it. Duval was staggered, and his grip on the gun weakened. Reese hit him again, knocking him back into the arms of Hank and Dusty. This time they held him, but Duval fought to break loose until he was breathless. Dusty pulled a piggin'-string from his jacket pocket and used it to tie Duval's hands behind him.

The look of wildness left Duval, and he said, "Take the money and turn me loose. It won't get you hombres anything to kill me."

"We'd have killed you before now if that was in our minds," Reese told him. "We want you alive, Duval."

The man stared at him, fear in his eyes. "You're lawmen?"

"CPA investigators," Reese told him. "The man who was arrested for Frank Venable's murder happens to be a member of the Association." He shook his head when Duval started to protest that he didn't know anything about any murder. "You murdered Frank Venable," he said. "And we're taking you back to Texas."

"No!"

"Why not, Duval?"

"You can't prove anything on me!"

Reese smiled without amusement. "Any man smart enough to plan the sort of murder and robbery such as you pulled is smart enough to know that there's evidence enough against you. You were seen near the spot where Venable was murdered, and you know it. Then there are the saddle-bags—Venable's—with the loot in them."

CHAPTER XI

A Hard Decision

HALL picked up the saddle-bags, and there was a musical jingle of gold and silver coins. Reese noticed a gold chain coming from the pocket of Duval's pocket and fastened to the man's belt. He removed the chain, and a fine gold watch was attached to the chain. Engraved on the man's watch case were the initials "FV."

"Venable's money and Venable's watch," Reese said. "And don't try to tell us that you found this loot somewhere."

Duval began to curse him.

Smith made his appearance now that there was no longer any danger. "How about the rest of my money?" he asked. "You promised me two hundred, mister."

Duval now cursed the old man, realizing that it had been he who had led the CPA men there.

Reese said, "Give him a hundred and twenty dollars out of the saddle-bags, Hank. I'll make an accounting of the money when I turn it over to Sheriff Doan down at Garrity."

Hank opened one of the bags and counted out the money. Smith cupped his hands to receive the coins, and said peevishly, "All that money. Seems as though I should get more than two hundred. Without my help, you'd never have found this hombre and—"

"Listen, old man," Hank growled, "two hundred is probably the most you ever earned honestly with so little work. I don't want to hear another word out of you!"

Smith didn't argue.

They had the old man finish earning his money by riding with Hank to where Duval's horses were hidden. When they returned, the redhead was leading a strawberry roan rigged with a saddle, and a sorrel mare. Hank had the sorrel on his catch-rope. Reese untied Duval's hands so the prisoner could climb onto the roan, then bound them to the saddle-horn. He told Hank to turn the sorrel loose, since they had no use for it. Dusty Trail mounted his own horse and caught up the reins of Duval's roan.

Reese swung to the buckskin's saddle after placing the money-filled bags across it, then he looked down at the old man. "What's the shortest way out of here, Smith?"

Smith pointed to a rocky ridge to the east. "That's the shortest way," he said. "But it'll be hard going. Maybe you'd rather head back the way you came, back past my camp."

"We'll head east," Reese said. "We've got no time to waste."

He took the lead, and Dusty followed with the sullen Jake Duval while Hank brought up the rear. It was hard going, and it was nearly mid-day when they reached the ridge. They spent another hour climbing the high rise and then dropping down the treacherous opposite side. But then after perhaps a quarter of a mile through brush and boulders, they came out onto grass flats and the way to Texas seemed open to them.

They sighted a cow camp an hour later, but passed it at a distance. Reese knew that they should stop somewhere for a meal, but he feared to trust any of the men in the Neutral Strip—except the people at the Lazy F Ranch—now that he had Duval with them. He didn't think anyone would try to free the man out of friendship, but there was always a possibility that trouble might come of stopping at some camp or ranch where Duval might tell of the money Reese was carrying, and suggest that it could be stolen from the CPA men.

There would be no way to keep the man quiet if he should try such a thing in an attempt to win his freedom. The money was no longer important to Duval. He was now worried about his neck.

Reese said, "We'll swing southeast and stop at the Forbes ranch for some grub. We should make it that far before dark."

They crossed miles of grassland, then at sundown reached the strip of broken country bordering Milt Forbes' range. They were midway through the rough stretch when Hank Ball rode up alongside his chief.

"You hear shooting, Doc?"

Reese reined in, then nodded. "You've got sharp ears, Hank. Trouble at Lazy F Ranch again."

"Maybe we'd better have a look."

"I don't know. Our job is to get Duval to Texas."

"There are women at that ranch, Doc."

"Yeah," Reese said, frowning. "You and Dusty wait here."

HE LIFTED his buckskin to a lope and shortly topped a rise from which he could look down on Milt Forbes' building. It was dusk now, and he could see the muzzle flashes of the guns firing on the buildings. And the flashes of a gun being fired from the ranchhouse.

Close to a dozen men had surrounded the place and were sniping at the sod house from every side. So far, the people at the Lazy F were holding them off, keeping the attackers at a distance. But it was a losing fight for Milt Forbes and his one hired hand, Reese knew. Two men couldn't stand off such odds for long. When darkness came, the attackers could close in and shoot directly into the house.

Savage anger gripped Steve Reese. The Sodville crowd might call this tax collecting, but it was more like outright banditry.

Three good men attacking from the rear might easily drive off the gunmen. In fact, Reese told himself that this was the sort of fight in which decent men were duty-bound to take a part. But he had another duty. His chief, Colonel Beauvine, had ordered him to save Dan Norman from the gallows if he were convinced of the condemned man's innocence. And if he joined in this fight,

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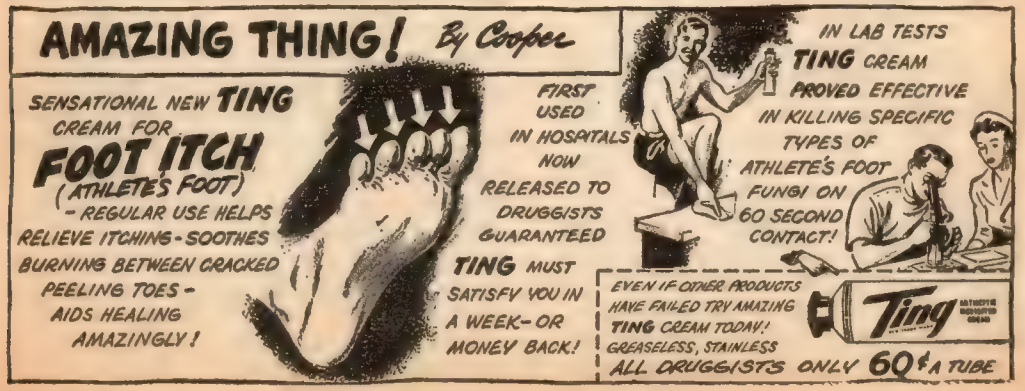
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taking Hank and Dusty with him, it would mean that Duval, his only hope of saving Norman would escape.

No, they could take Duval off his horse and tie him up so that he could not escape. Still, there was no certainty, the CPA field chief reflected, that he and his companions would come out of the fight alive. And their deaths would doom Dan Norman.

It was a difficult decision for a man to make, and Reese knew that he must weigh the life of Dan Norman against the lives of the people at the Lazy F Ranch.

He swung his horse about, rode back to where Dusty and Hank waited with the prisoner. He reined the buckskin to a rearing stop, then dropped from saddle. He took the saddle-bags containing the stolen money from his saddle and handed them to Dusty Trail. He took Frank Venable's watch from his coat pocket and gave it to the pudgy rider.

"Head for Texas, Dusty," he said. "Turn Duval over to Sheriff Doan at Garrity, if Hank and I don't catch up to you. Give him the watch and the money. Then see to it that the sheriff takes the proper steps to clear Dan Norman."

"All right, Doc," Dusty said. "I'll sure do my best."

"Luck to you," Reese said, and then wheeled away. "Hank, come along!"

They drove their already trail-weary mounts through the rough strip at a hard run, and it was hazy dusk when they gained the rise overlooking the ranch headquarters. Hank was seldom a profane man, but he swore bitterly now as he saw how many men were firing on the Lazy F ranchhouse.

He said, "Doc, it'll be suicide for us," but he jerked his rifle from its boot. "What'll we do, anyway? Ride down on that bunch, a-shooting?"

Reese said, "Hold on a minute. Something's happening over there!"

They saw two riders race from the barn and cross the yard. They expected the pair to be shot down, but surprisingly the Sodville gunmen held their fire.

"It's the girls, Doc!"

"Yeah, and those tough-hands are letting them ride out."

"No, they're trying to catch them! I'm going down there and—"

"Wait a minute, Hank!"

Reese's curt order held the angry redhead, and they saw the two riders swerve to avoid three men who ran to head them off. One girl escaped, but the other was caught as a man got a hold on her mount's bridle. Then a gun opened up from the house, its second shot targeting the man trying to bring the horse to a stop. He collapsed, and his two companions turned and ran toward a brush-fringed hollow where the Sodville band's horses stood. Free now, the other girl came on at a hard lope toward the rough terrain. But over in the hollow, the pair of Sodville men flung themselves onto mounts and struck out after her.

Reese said, "Let's go, Hank!" and touched spurs to his buckskin.

THEY galloped down from the rise and were now seen by the girl who was Milt Forbe's older daughter, Louise. She swerved toward them, but Reese shouted, "Get to cover!" The other girl, Ginny, was directly ahead of the CPA men and the two Sodville toughs, rapidly gaining on her, kept on coming as though taking Reese and Hank for some of their own crowd.

Ginny flashed past Reese, and he saw the look of relief on her face. The Sodville men at last realized that the riders coming at them were not friends, and they brought their horses to a rearing halt and grabbed for their guns.

They opened fire at once, at point-blank range.

Hank Ball yelped, and Reese glanced at the lanky redhead and saw him reeling in his saddle. There was blood on Hank's face. The next instant Hank went down with his horse. Reese winced. Alarm knifed through him. His partner was dead!

There was no caution in him now. He rode recklessly at the two toughs, his Colt blasting. A scream rose from the throat of one of the pair. The hit man dropped his gun and wheeled his horse about in panicky flight.

Reese's next shot was even more accurate, knocking the other man off his horse and

sprawling him on the ground. The horse raced past Reese with flapping stirrups, and he went after it. Once he had the animal in tow, he led it to where Hank had gone down.

Ginny Forbes had swung around and was aproaching Hank. He had thrown himself clear of his horse when the mount went down with a bullet through its head, and with a thankful heart Reese saw that Hank wasn't badly hurt. A slug had creased the redhead deeply across the left cheek and, though the wound was bleeding badly, it wasn't serious. Hank still held onto his rifle, and he pulled himself onto the horse Reese led.

"Which way, Doc?" he asked.

"Into the brush and rocks," Reese replied. "The next move will be the tough crowd's, and we can't afford to be caught in the open. Come on!"

They headed for the rise, and once they topped it Reese looked back toward the ranch. It was nearly full dark now, and he saw no gun flashes. He knew that the man he had wounded was telling his companions about his narrow escape from two strange riders. The lot of them would begin to worry, and it would take them some time to figure out their next move. Meanwhile, the men in the ranchhouse were being given a respite.

The two CPA men and Ginny Forbes rode to a cluster of boulders that would serve as cover if they were attacked. They dismounted, and Ginny insisted in wiping the blood from Hank's face with her neckscarf. Hank didn't protest. He was not so badly hurt that he couldn't enjoy having an attractive girl fuss over him.

Reese said, "Ginny, we'd better find your sister. You and Hank keep watch for those tough-hands, and I'll go look for her."

"Don't bother," Ginny said. "You won't find her."

"Why not?"

"She's on her way to Sodville."

Reese stared at her. "What for?" he asked.

Ginny shrugged. "Louise had some crazy notion that Cleve Lambert doesn't know about what's happening at the Lazy F Ranch," she said. "She believes if she tells him what his men are doing, he'll come and stop them. She talked me into thinking it was a chance to save us all. Dad and Red Tyson were urging us to make a run for it, and so I agreed to do as they wanted in the hope of helping Louise get to Sodville. We didn't tell Dad or Red what she planned, for they're certain that Lambert is to blame for this trouble. But they were sure that those toughs wouldn't shoot women. Well, we weren't shot at—" Ginny shuddered—"but they sure tried to take us alive. Thanks to you two, we're safe out of their hands."

REESE didn't know what to think of Louise Forbes' desperate ride to Sodville. It might be that her belief in Cleve Lambert was sound. At least, the man wouldn't let any harm come to her.

Reese asked, "How many men in that crowd, Ginny?"

"There were twelve," the girl said. "But Red shot two of them when the fight started and another when I was trying to get away. You killed one, Mr. Reese, and so that leaves eight. My father is out of the fight. He's got a wound in his right shoulder and another in his left leg. Red is doing all the shooting from the house."

"Who's leading the bunch?"

"That fat Chris Hackett."

"Did he start the fight without any demands for tax money?"

Ginny shook her head. "He sent a man in to talk to Dad," she said. "The man said they had orders from Territorial Marshal Luke Thatcher to collect the two hundred and twenty dollars Dad owes in taxes, or they were to make an example of him that would scare every other rancher and settler in No Man's Land. Dad lost his temper, cussed the man out, and after that the shooting started." The girl tilted her head to one side, listening. "There's no shooting now. Do you suppose they've got Red?" Her voice was shaky.

"It's not that, Ginny," Reese told her. "They're worried about Hank and me. They don't like the idea of us being behind them."

"We just going to wait here?" Hank asked. His voice was rough with anger. "I say we should go gunning for 'em. It'd be

no more risky than waiting for them to come gunning for us—which maybe they won't."

"Maybe you're right, Hank," Reese said. "But first we've got to know that Ginny is safe." He turned to her. "Is there any place you can go—to a neighbor's place, maybe?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Ginny said. "Not with Dad shot up and still in danger, and Red trying to stand off those bandits all alone. I've got a Winchester on my saddle, and I know how to use it."

"That's loco," Hank cut in. "A girl fighting."

"My mother helped Dad fight Comanches on the Texas frontier twenty years ago," Ginny said. "And what she could do, I can do. I'm staying with you two. I—" Her voice lifted in alarm. "Here they come!"

CHAPTER XII

A Girl's Faith

A HALF-DOZEN riders—shadowy shapes in the darkness—topped the rise that lay between Lazy F range and the rocks in which Reese and Hank and the girl had taken cover. The field chief ran to his horse, grabbed his rifle from its boot.

Hank crouched behind a boulder and opened fire. The redhead was in no mood to warn the Sodville gunmen off with words or a shot over their heads. He fired into the bunch, and a man cried out and spilled from his saddle following the very first shot. Then the other five charged at the rocks, guns blazing.

Easy targets.

Hank dropped another rider, and Reese's first shot caused still another to slump in the saddle and swerve away. The remaining three pulled up short, then wheeled and raced back over the rise. But it wasn't long before Reese and his companions heard them circling around the rocks to take the position from the rear. The Sodville men were keeping out of sight, however, and in a few minutes, when they got set, they pumped a dozen or more shots into the rocks from the cover of a brush thicket.

Reese said grimly, "We've got to clear out of here while there's still a chance. Hank, there must be only two men guarding the ranch headquarters, if my count is right. We may be able to take them by suprise and—"

"Let's get started," Hank said.

They mounted and rode out under a hail of slugs, Ginny and Hank in the lead. Reese rode a short distance, then pulled up and swung his buckskin about and drove several shots at the brush thicket from long range. He retreated a hundred yards, then fired three more shots at the flashes of the Sodville guns. By that time his companions were over the rise, and he rode after them.

Two horsemen loped away as the girl and the two CPA men crossed the grass flats toward the ranch buildings, and Hank fired a couple of shots to keep them moving. Reese wasn't sure, but he thought that one of the fleeing pair was bulky enough to be fat Chris Hackett.

Ginny called out to Red Tyson as they neared the buildings, and the young cowhand appeared at the doorway of the house as they raced into the yard. He was carrying a rifle, and he ran to Ginny and angrily demanded to know why she had come back. And then, before she could reply, he said:

"Where's Louise?" His voice was sharp with alarm. "They didn't catch her, did they?"

Ginny dismounted and started toward the house, saying over her shoulder, "Louise is all right. Don't worry about her. And I came back because I couldn't run out on you and Dad. After all, my place is here."

She disappeared into the unlighted house.

Reese dismounted and handed the reins of both his buckskin and Ginny's pony to Hank Ball. The redhead rode into the barn with the horses in tow.

"How bad hurt is Milt Forbes?" Reese asked.

"Not too bad, I guess," Tyson said. "Ginny and Louise doctored him up as best they could after I dug the slug out of his shoulder with a knife. The wound in his leg isn't much, but I'm worried a little about his

shoulder, and about his losing so much blood. We ought to have a doctor for him, but the nearest is at Beaver City and I sure can't go to fetch him. Those crazy galoots!" He cursed the Sodville men. "What's it getting them, anyway? I downed three of them, but they didn't pull out until you hombres showed up. Thatcher and Lambert sure must be paying them plenty to get them to risk their hides like this."

"Most likely they expected to have it all their way," Reese said. "But you put up a better fight than they counted on. And they sure didn't figure on having Hank and me jump them."

"You think they've cleared out?"

"Maybe they have. There's only five of them left."

"Where'd Louise go?" Tyson asked. "I told her and Ginny to light out for Texas, so they'd be safe. Did Louise ride south, Reese?"

REESE could see no reason to keep it a secret that the older girl had set out for Sodville. But it was a blow to Red Tyson.

The CPA man said, "She still believes that Cleve Lambert is a decent sort, and she hopes to get him to call off that gun crew. I've had a talk with Lambert, and I still don't know how to figure him. But I'm hoping Louise is right about him."

"She's not right," Tyson said bitterly. "She's let him fool her with his fancy talk. If I was sure those gunhands weren't coming here, I'd go after her. Yeah, I'd go all the way to Sodville and settle with that tinhorn!"

"You'd get yourself killed."

"Not before I gut-shot Lambert!"

"Take it easy, Red," Reese said. "It'd be a fool thing to do. Suppose Louise is right about him and you killed him? You'd have it on your conscience. And for more reasons that one. You'd never be able to face her again. No matter what you want to believe, Louise is in love with him—and she can't help it."

Tyson didn't say anything to that, but Reese knew it hurt.

"You may as well face the truth," the CPA man went on. "No matter how much you don't like it."

Hank came from the barn. "What about some grub, Red?" he said. "It's so long since my pardner and I had a meal that we're apt to die of starvation instead of bullets." The fight with the Sodville crowd had given him a chance to work off his anger for the bunch, and he was in a far better humor now. "Either I eat now, or I'll have to punch another hole in my belt to take up its slack."

"Ginny will rustle up a meal for you," Tyson said. "Just go into the house. Me, I'm going to keep watch. I'm not so sure those hombres have cleared out."

Ginny had lighted a lamp in the small but comfortably furnished parlor. She came from another room as the CPA men entered the house.

"How is your father, Ginny?" Reese asked.

"I think he's a little better," the girl said, and forced a smile that she didn't feel. "I gave him a little brandy, and it helped him sleep. I'm going to Beaver City for a doctor as soon as it's safe to ride out. In the meantime, could I fix you something to eat?"

"That's taking the words right out of a man's mouth," Hank Ball said, chuckling. "You a mind reader, Ginny?"

They went to the kitchen with her, and after she lighted a lamp, Hank put kindling into the cookstove and started the fire. The girl busied herself with making a quick meal, and it wasn't long before Reese and his partner were seated by the table. Ginny had served them steak, fried potatoes, warmed-up biscuits, coffee.

"Only thing that spoils this meal," Hank said, "is the thought of poor old Dusty riding toward Texas on an empty stomach." He gave Ginny one of his most charming smiles. "Maybe you'll give us some grub to pack along when we start out. We'll probably catch up with him if we start out soon."

But at that moment Red Tyson burst into the kitchen.

And said excitedly, "They're coming back!"

Reese left the table, grabbed up his hat and rifle, followed Tyson from the house. Behind him, Ginny put out the lamp in the kitchen and Hank Ball hurried to extinguish

the light in the parlor.

Reese had expected to see the five survivors of the band that had attacked the ranch headquarters earlier. It was a shock for him to see three times that many horsemen slowly approaching.

Red Tyson said savagely, "This is what comes of Louise's going to see Lambert!"

Reese shook his head. "Don't blame her, Red," he said. "These men were on the way here before she started out. They couldn't have made it, otherwise."

THE horsemen reined in a hundred yards short of the buildings, and one shouted Reese's name. And called out, "You heard me, Reese? This is Luke Thatcher. I want a parley. I'm sending a man in to talk to you!"

"All right," Reese shouted back. "Send him in."

"It's a trick!" Tyson said. "Don't trust them, Reese!"

"No harm in finding out what they've got to say," the CPA man said. "Maybe they'll be willing to dicker. We can't win a fight with them, but Thatcher knows we'll down plenty of them before they get us. You and Hank take up positions at the windows."

Tyson turned to enter the house, and Hank Ball moved back from the doorway from which he had been watching. They left the door open so that Reese could enter in a hurry if the Sodville crowd was trying some trick. A rider was already slow-walking his horse away from the bunch and toward the buildings. Reese soon saw that it was the bulky Chris Hackett.

Hackett entered the ranchyard, reined in, and said nervously, "I'm not here because I want to be, Reese. I had a bellyful of fighting, but—well, Thatcher gives the orders."

"What's that no-good want, Hackett?"

"A deal without any more gun-play."

"Sound reasonable. What are the details?"

"Thatcher wants the money you took off Jake Duval."

Reese was taken by surprise. "How's he know I caught Duval?"

Hackett grew bolder, gigged his horse closer. "Thatcher sent me down here with a bunch of tough-hands today to teach Milt Forbes a lesson," he said. "He figured that once we treated Forbes rough, we wouldn't have so much trouble with the other ranchers and settlers. But that was only part of it. Thatcher and Cleve Lambert fell out after you left Sodville last night. The dude told Thatcher that there was to be no more rough stuff. Thatcher laughed at him, and told Lambert *he* was the real boss of the western part of No Man's Land. Thatcher told Lambert he'd never figured on turning any tax money over to the Territorial Council. Lambert got riled up, and Thatcher threw him out of his office. Well—Thatcher sent me and some others down here to deal with Milt Forbes. And because of you, we got the worst of the bargain. Nobody figured you'd show up here."

Hackett paused, took out the butt of a cigar and lighted it. In the glare of the match, his fat face was shiny with sweat and wholly lacking in bravado. Hackett had told the truth; he'd had enough of fighting. Once the cigar butt was burning, he said:

"Last night when you and your pardners chased me and the others back to Sodville, you said that some other friends of yours had Jake Duval trapped down in Texas. I told that to Thatcher, but he didn't believe it. This morning he took a bunch or riders and started a search for Duval, hoping to find him before you did. He figured the likeliest place for Duval to hide-out was in the *Brenoso* badlands. Thatcher and his men met an old-timer named Smith riding away from the *Brenoso*." Hackett paused to puff on his cigar.

"And Smith told them that I'd caught Duval?"

"Yeah. The old man said that you'd started for Texas with Duval, so Thatcher started out on your trail."

"And now he's caught up with me and wants to make a deal," Reese said. "What's the deal, Hackett?"

"Smith told Hackett that you took a pair of saddle-bags off Duval, and that they were filled with money," Hackett said. "Smith said that there must be about fifty thousand dollars in gold and silver specie in those

saddle-bags."

"He's way off. Ten thousand is more like it."

"Anyway, Thatcher wants that money, Reese."

"And what is he offering in return?"

"He'll clear out," Hackett said. "He won't make any more trouble for you or the Forbes family."

"If I had the money," Reese said, "I might go for such a deal."

"If you had it?"

"That's it, Hackett. One of my partners is here with me, but the other is on his way to Texas with the money."

Hackett shook his head, almost sadly. "Thatcher won't believe that," he said. "He won't believe that you or anybody else would let that much money pass out of his hands. Me, I know Luke Thatcher. Well, I've talked with you like he wanted. The first chance I get, I'm ducking out on him. I've a feeling that my number will be up if I stay and side him in a fight." He lifted his reins. "You're a decent sort, Reese. I kind of wish you luck."

"Thanks," Reese said drily. "You tell Thatcher and the rest of that unholy crowd that they'll be bucking my guns for nothing. And that all of us here can shoot straight."

Chris Hackett nodded and turned his horse away.

CHAPTER XIII

Siege of the Lazy F

THATCHER hadn't been idle during this time. As Hackett rode out, Reese saw that the Sodville gunmen had spread out and were now encircling the ranch buildings. He entered the house, and Red Tyson closed and barred the door. The darkened house seemed charged with live danger. Stout though its sod walls were, its defenders could be defeated by a prolonged siege.

Reese said, "We've got two chances. One is that Thatcher will believe it when Hackett tells him that I haven't got the money with me. The other is—if Thatcher won't believe that—we may be able to cut down enough of them to scare the others off."

"The second is our only hope," Red Tyson said bitterly. "Thatcher will have to find out for himself that you don't have the money he wants. And besides, he's determined to teach Milt Forbes and me a lesson, one that will throw a scare into anybody else that refuses to knuckle down to his tax collecting. Reese, I'm telling you and Hank that we'll have to make every shot count. We'll have to cut down plenty of them before the rest get a bellyful."

As proof that the cowpuncher knew what he was talking about, there was a sudden burst of gunfire. Slugs shrieked through the windows, thudded into the doors. The window panes had been shot away in the earlier attack, and so there were no dangerous flying glass splinters. And the doors were of heavy plank. Too, the gunmen were shooting at long range and either from flat on the ground or from crouching positions behind cover, so what slugs entered by the windows were high and less deadly than frightening.

Reese took up a position at one of the two parlor windows, shooting occasionally at muzzle flashes but not exposing himself. Red Tyson went to the kitchen, and every few minutes left it to dart into the other rooms to shoot from the windows there. The little cowpuncher was a good man in a fight, Steve Reese had to admit. By shooting from the side windows as well as from the one in the kitchen, Tyson was making sure that none of the attackers closed in on an unprotected part of the house. Hank Ball was at the other parlor window, crouching there with the barrel of his rifle over the sill.

After perhaps ten minutes of heavy shooting, the guns ringing the ranch buildings were suddenly still and the three men held their fire. The quiet was jarring after so much racket.

Ginny Forbes came from her father's bedroom, saying, "Are they leaving?" She was a game one; but now her voice was shaky

with fright, and understandably so. "Do you think—"

"No, Ginny," Reese said. "This may be some sort of trick. You'd better get back to your father—and keep down, close to the floor."

A minute or more passed, and the quiet became oppressive. Reese became aware that his teeth were clenched and that he was holding his rifle with a viselike grip. He tried to relax but could not. He peered over the window sill, saw nothing. Then a voice came out of the darkness, causing him to start.

"Reese! You there, Reese!"

It was Luke Thatcher's harsh voice, demanding tone. The outlaw chief had come in close, and Reese thought excitedly, "If I could only bring him down!" He came erect, peered from the window. Then he realized that Thatcher wouldn't be so foolhardy as to come into the open.

Hank Ball, too, was hoping for a shot at the man, and he said bitterly, "He's cagey, Doc. He must be across there inside the barn. If he is, he got in the back way and—"

Thatcher yelled again. "Reese! You hear me?"

Reese was not a profane man, but there was rage in him now and he shouted a curse at the man. And added, "I hear you, Thatcher! What do you want?"

"I'm giving you one last chance, Reese! You should know by now that you can't hold out!"

"I told you that money is on its way to Texas."

Thatcher was slow in replying. "That's the truth?"

"Lying about it wouldn't get me anything, would it?"

"How long since your pardner headed out?"

"Just before dark!" Reese yelled. "And you can't catch him, because you don't know what part of Texas he was heading for."

ONCE more Thatcher was silent for a brief moment. Then he called, "Reese, you're going to get yourself and everybody with you, including the girl, killed unless you do the smart thing. I'm making you an offer. Come out without your guns and put us on your pardner's trail. We'll turn you loose when we catch up with him and you tell him to hand over the money. I'm giving you a chance to buy your way out of this tight. What do you say?"

"Give me a minute to think it over."

"All right," Thatcher shouted from somewhere in the inky darkness of the barn. "One minute, but no longer!"

Hank Ball said, "Don't go for that, Doc." The redhead's voice was excited. "He'd never keep his word. That hombre's a dyed-in-the-wool scoundrel!"

Reese said, "I know that, Hank. And he's just ornery enough to keep up this shooting out of spite, even though he knows now that there's nothing in it for him."

He thought again that the fight could be ended if he could bring down Luke Thatcher, for without a leader the Sodville toughs would certainly lose heart. The idea came then, and it was a reckless one.

He called across the dark room to Hank, "We can get out of this only by playing his sort of game, bucko. Maybe we can trick him. Here's what we'll do. I'll turn down his offer. He'll have his men open fire again. Then you yell that you want to talk. You tell him that I got hit, that I'm dead or hurt bad. And say you'll take him up on the offer he made me. Then—"

"Hold on, there," Hank said. "Doc, I've never disobeyed an order you gave me, and I'm not starting now. But if you're telling me to go out there without my guns and put myself in the hands of that bunch of cutthroats—"

"Not at all, Hank. You just stall Thatcher along for a little while," Reese said. "Give me a chance to work out a scheme I aim to try."

"Doc, don't take any fool chances!"

"It's our only chance," Reese said. "I—"

Thatcher's shout broke in on him: "Your minute's up, Reese! Have you decided to play it smart?"

"We'll fight it out, Thatcher! Once we've downed enough of your toughs, the rest will run out on you!"

A burst of gunfire was Thatcher's answer. Slugs played havoc in the Forbes parlor. A

lamp shattered explosively. Other objects were smashed.

Hank Ball yelled, "They're shooting down on us from the roof of the barn!"

Reese gambled with his life to glance from the window. Three or four men were lying prone on the barn roof, keeping up a heavy fire through the two parlor windows. They had climbed to the roof at the rear of the building, all the while protected by the barn's sod walls. There was no driving them off, Reese realized. They made the parlor a death-trap, and if the shooting kept up there wouldn't be a single piece of furniture left whole. But there was one advantage; with Thatcher inside the barn and three or four of his gunmen atop it, there would be fewer guns ringing the house on its other three sides. For, as he saw, only five or six men were still firing at the house from long range as at the start of the fight. That meant that his scheme had a good chance of succeeding.

"Give me about a minute, Hank," he called, then ran from the parlor to the kitchen. "Red, ease the door open," he told the cowpuncher. "I'm going outside and try to get at Thatcher."

"It'd be committing suicide!"

"It's our only hope."

"Well, it's up to you," Red Tyson said, and come from the window to the door.

He removed the bar, opened the door just wide enough for a man to squeeze through, and Reese, leaving his rifle behind and crouching low, plunged out into the danger-filled darkness of the ranch yard. As he flattened to the ground, he heard Tyson close and bar the door.

A RIFLE cracked about a hundred yards away, but Reese heard the slug thud into the window frame and knew that the shot had not been aimed at him. None of the Sodville toughs sniping at the rear of the house had seen the door open and him emerge. He drew his Colt and began to crawl away from the house, aiming toward the small creek that flowed past the side of Lazy F headquarters.

Suddenly there was another jarring quiet, then Reese heard voices shouting back and forth—Thatcher's from the barn and Hank's from the house. The red-headed CPA man was carrying out his orders. Now if Luke Thatcher could be stalled for a couple of minutes—

Reese snaked his way toward the scrub cottonwoods that grew along the bank of the creek.

He flattened to the ground at a sudden noise nearby. It had sounded like a boot scuffing a rock. A shadowy figure moved among the trees, then crouched by a rock not twenty feet from Reese. The man leveled his rifle over the rock, its muzzle pointed toward the house, then he glanced Reese's way—and uttered a startled grunt.

Reese leaped up, rushed him, and the man swung his rifle about to fire. But a rifle was a clumsy weapon at close range. The shot went wild. Then Reese, though momentarily blinded by the muzzle flash, was close enough to club down with his gun. He struck twice, and the Sodville man collapsed like an axed steer.

Farther along the creek, another rifle opened up. Reese whirled, his gun bucking in his hand. Two shots, and the second tough was down. Reese darted through the trees, dropped down the creek bank. He crouched there for a moment, his heart pounding hard and his nerves taut.

For a time, he was sure that the others would be alerted and come after him. But then he realized that the two men he'd dropped had been well separated from the rest of the crowd, and the other hardcases must believe that the shots had been aimed at the house. He ventured on, bent low so that the creek bank hid him.

The stream was shallow, the water not even reaching to the tops of his boots. In a moment, he was opposite the side of the barn. It was only fifty feet away, but there was neither a door nor a window facing him. He must either make for the front door or the one through which Thatcher had entered at the rear. And that meant he must expose himself to the guns of the men atop the barn and the men still farther back from the buildings.

This was the critical moment, and the lives of the three people inside the house as well as his own depended upon his getting

into the barn without being seen. He thought bleakly that he had one chance in a thousand. Thatcher was angrily shouting at Hank Ball from the barn, accusing the CPA man of stalling and threatening to order his men to open fire again if Hank didn't come out. It would be but a moment before Thatcher would suspect some sort of trick. Reese rose to hands and knees, intending to dash for the barn.

Then from one of Thatcher's men came the yell: "Rider coming, Luke!" And a moment later: "It's Cleve Lambert!"

Thatcher shouted back, "Bring him around behind the barn!"

It was Reese's chance. He waited only a moment longer, until he heard the clopping of hoofs. He had no idea of what Lambert's arrival meant, but he hoped that the attention of most of the gunmen would be on the man. He rose and dashed for the barn, gained the building's side without a gun opening up on him. He pressed against the wall as he moved, slowly now, to the front corner. There no longer was any danger of the men lying on the roof seeing him, and the gunmen farther away might fail to spot him in the shadows of the building.

He slipped around the corner, gained the wide front doorway.

And plunged inside.

CHAPTER XIV

Time for Law and Order

IN THE sooty darkness, Reese collided with some solid object that knocked his feet from under him. He spilled over the thing, and landed hard beyond it. He was shaken, dazed. And he feared that a gun would open up on him while he lay sprawled there. But no shot came, and he knew then that he had guessed properly in thinking that Thatcher had left by the rear door to meet Cleve Lambert.

He rose and discovered that he had been bowled over by three sacks of grain which had been stacked just inside the doorway. Thatcher had placed them there, as cover for himself while he did his dickering. Beyond stood three saddled horses, badly spooked; the animals he and Hank and Ginny had ridden.

Three other horses were in the stalls, and they also were acting up because of the gunfire. But the guns were silent now; whatever the purpose of Lambert's visit, his coming had given the besieged people at the Lazy F a reprieve—and Steve Reese a wobbly but gradually strengthened hope.

He reloaded the fired chambers in his gun, then moved across the barn. The door at the rear was a narrow one, and it stood ajar. He pressed against the sod wall, peered through the doorway.

Three men stood about twenty feet beyond the barn, one of them the bulky, bearded Luke Thatcher.

Reese swung his gun in line with Thatcher and was about to call out when two more men appeared, one afoot and the other mounted. The mounted man was Cleve Lambert, and, like the others, he had a gun in his hand. Lambert reined in facing Thatcher. Reese was an interested witness; at last he would know just what sort of man the dudish Cleve Lambert was.

Lambert said harshly, "I got word that a bunch of your men were shooting up this place, Luke. But I wasn't told that you were here. I—"

Thatcher cut in, "Now you're wishing you'd stayed in Sodville, eh?"

Lambert shook his head. "On the contrary," he said, "I'm glad I've found you here. Otherwise, you'd lie out of it. You'd swear that this brutality wasn't your wish, that your men disobeyed orders. But now I'll never have any doubt that I made a mistake when I trusted you with authority."

"So what are you going to do about it, Cleve?"

"There's only one thing for me to do," Lambert told him. "I built you up, and it's for me to tear you down. I'm no longer blind. I see now that the time hasn't come for law and order in No Man's Land. The

only law is a gun, as it's always been. A man has got to be his own peace officer, judge, jury, and executioner. Luke, I've found you guilty and—"

There was a roar of a gun, Thatcher's gun.

Lambert jerked violently in the saddle. But even as he began to fall, he fired at the man he'd come to kill. His first shot missed Thatcher and struck a man behind him. His second shot found Thatcher, but the huge black-bearded man did not fall. Thatcher merely yelled an oath as he staggered, and fired another shot into Lambert as the man toppled from his horse.

This happened so swiftly that the CPA field chief was caught off-guard. Now he called, "You, Thatcher!" Recklessness possessed him. He exposed himself in the doorway. Thatcher turned toward him, his left hand pressed against the wound in his left side and his right swinging his gun up.

They fired together, but it was Luke Thatcher who went down.

And even before the outlaw chief sprawled loosely on the ground, Reese swung his gun toward the other two gunmen. The one who had come in with Lambert yelped and leaped toward Lambert's horse, flinging himself onto its back and wheeling it away in panicky flight. The other beaded Reese with his gun, but he was looking into the muzzle of the CPA man's weapon and fear froze his trigger finger.

"Drop it!" Reese shouted. "Thatcher's dead, and you'll be, too, if you're not smart!" He relaxed as the man let his gun drop. "Now listen, you," he said harshly. "There's nothing here for you Sodville toughs. Tell the rest of your crowd—and clear out with them!"

THE man shouted to his companions on the barn roof, telling them that Thatcher was dead. They dropped to the ground, three of them, then quickly let their weapons drop as they saw that Reese had them covered. The CPA man ordered them to pick up the dead Luke Thatcher and the man who had been downed by Cleve Lambert's gun. They obeyed, and disappeared through the darkness.

In a few minutes the rest of the bunch were gathering around them, well out of gun range. And shorty there was a drumming of hoofs as they all rode out, and the night grew quiet as the sound was muted by distance.

Hank Ball called anxiously, "Doc! You all right, Doc?"

He came hurrying through the barn.

Steve Reese said, "I'm all right, Hank." His voice was a bit shaky. He knew that he was alive and unharmed only because he'd had a lot of luck backing up his courage tonight.

Cleve Lambert was alive but unconscious. The two CPA men carried him to the house, and Ginny Forbes said, "We'll put him in Louise's room." She held a lighted lamp. As they laid Lambert on the bed, he regained consciousness and Reese told him that Luke Thatcher was dead and that the gunmen had gone.

Lambert said weakly, "Louise is safe. She's at my place in Sodville. I told a man I can trust to guard her and bring her home tomorrow." He was silent a moment, his face twisted with pain. Then he managed, "If I don't pull through"—he was looking at Ginny now—"please tell her I'm to blame for what happened, because I was stupid but not dishonest. Tell her, too, that I—that I love her."

He lapsed into unconsciousness again.

"He's dead?" Ginny asked. She was crying.

It was clear that she wanted him to live, for her sister. Reese sensed that, and he saw too that Red Tyson no longer hated the man. The young cowpuncher knew now, if he had ever needed convincing, that his love for Louise was hopeless. He bent over the wounded man.

"He's just passed out, Ginny," he said. "There's a chance for him. I'll do what I can for him until you fetch the doctor from Beaver City. I'll take care of both him and your dad. I'm better at patching up wounds than you are."

Ginny nodded. "I'll get started," she said, and left the room.

Hank Ball was lounging against the wall, a cigarette drooping from his lips. He was studying Red Tyson. "Red, take it from

an experienced man," he drawled. "It ain't always the prettiest girl that's best for a man. Now, there's that Ginny eating her heart out because you don't pay any attention to her because she's not as pretty as her sister. She's your kind of a girl, but you're so dumb you can't see it."

Tyson stared at him, frowning.

Hank continued, "Of course, Ginny's not going to get to be an old maid on your account. Not a girl like her. Why, it could be that when she gets to Beaver City, she'll meet a hombre better looking than you, and with a lot more sense."

A grin tugged at the corners of Red Tyson's mouth.

Hank looked as solemn as a judge. "Sure, now, Ginny wouldn't have to go all the way to Beaver to find an admirer," he said. "I've a notion to try my hand at courting her. That is, Red, unless you're going out there before she rides off and doing what you should do to make her plumb happy."

The little cowpuncher said, "I'll do just that," and hurried from the house.

Hank winked at his chief, and Reese chuckled over his partner playing the unfamiliar rôle of Cupid. Then he looked at the unconscious man on the bed, and his face turned stern. Cleve Lambert might well recover, as Tyson had said. And if he did, he should be a wiser man. He had done a fine thing tonight, though it had been foolish.

But it seemed to Steve Reese that there was something admirable in a man who tried to rectify his mistakes even in a foolish way. The future of No Man's Land would be shaped by men like Cleve Lambert, men who were wrong as often as they were right and yet were basically decent, and Reese hoped Lambert would be prominent among them.

HE SAID, "Nothing we can do here that Red can't do, Hank. We'll say good-by to Milt Forbes, and head for Texas."

They rode south ten minutes later, and No Man's Land was as quiet at the moment as any land, within or beyond the law, could be.

One of the first men they saw, upon riding into the cowtown of Garrity, was Sheriff Jess Doan. The old lawman was coming from the courthouse, and his leathery face ligthed up when he recognized Steve Reese.

"Your partner got here with the prisoner and the evidence, Reese," Doan said. "I got a wire off to the warden at the state prison and another to the Governor of Texas. Received answers to them, and Dan Norman will be pardoned just as soon as a couple of Rangers the Governor is sending get here to see that I can back up what my wires said. I've got Jake Duval locked up and the money and Frank Venable's watch is in my safe. But it was a close call for Dan Norman. He would have been hanged this morning if Dusty hadn't got here during the night."

A look of shock spread over Steve Reese's face. "Today's the thirteenth?"

"It sure is. You didn't know?"

Reese shook his head. "I see a calender so seldom that most days I don't know the date." He laughed. "It's good I didn't know how little time was left."

Dusty was in the lunchroom across the street, and at that hour, mid-afternoon, he was the only customer. The table at which he sat was littered with empty dishes. It looked as though Dusty had tried to make up at one sitting for all the meals he'd missed in No Man's Land.

But that wasn't what caused Reese and Hand to stare with amezement. Dusty was slumped on his chair, hands folded across his generous stomach, the picture of well-fed contentment. And the waitress, a cute little blonde, was holding a match to the cigar jutting from his mouth.

His cigar lighted, Dusty murmured, "Thanks, honey."

The waitress dimpled. "Oh, it's no trouble at all, Mr. Trail. I just love to smell cigar smoke, and I do think that a man looks sort of distinguished smoking a cigar. I truly do."

Hank said, in an awed whisper, "Now I've seen everything!"

Steve Reese chuckled. "All the comforts of home," he said. "Looks as though we're just in time to rescue him. A couple more days of such attention, and we'll never get Dusty to start back to Austin with us. Yes, sir. It's our duty to save him!" ● ● ●

Gault clubbed the lieutenant with his carbine

BUGLES and BLOOD

By AL STORM

IT WAS like a Brule warclub taking him between the eyes, this court-martial verdict. And John Gault stiffened against it, rocking forward on his toes as though, by sheer obstinacy, to beat it back. Only there was no beating it back. He was found guilty. Demoted to rank of trooper, second grade.

Major Meyer Mayo's impersonal tones jarred through him, driving a numbness

Broken in rank by the man he hated, John Gault battled the redskins to win back his chevrons

that went deeper and deeper.

"Respect for commissioned officers must be maintained," the major repeated solemnly. "For disregarding that fact, John Gault . . ."

Heat flooded the headquarters shack with oppressiveness. Flies churned unheeded through the wide-flung door. And beyond the axed tips of stockade logs, the sky stretched white-blue with shriveling summer.

Deliberately John Gault broke his attention, shifting enough so that the rim of his gaze took in the lifting hill's slopes beyond the wall. Death lurked there in patient waiting, ringing them in. Red-skinned death which he had out-fought, out-maneuvered through three enlistments. And now suddenly the knowledge come of a hundred deadly skirmishes counted for less than the outraged pride of a newly-commissioned lieutenant.

Sympathy marked Major Mayo's voice as he said, "At ease, Gault." He reached up and unbuttoned his tunic collar, then slouched back, scratching one bewhiskered jowl while he waited for a softening to enter Gault's rigid impassivity. But Gault held himself locked in cold anger. And, seeing this, the major scowled.

"Men," he said soberly. "Whether we wear bars, chevrons, or pitch manure as rookies, we are all soldiers. All working toward the same end. The War Department hasn't decided whether to reinforce us and put us in the field or whether to recall us entirely and let the Bozeman Trail be closed. So we dangle here, hemmed in and undermanned, like a ripe apple on the end of a limb. Damn it, this post is too small for petty bickering and personal feuding! We've got to live here. Some of us will die here. But we've got to get along."

No man spoke as the major's voice drained away. Lieutenants Fyer and Morton sat at uneasy attention. Lieutenant Harry Stocker nodded slightly and fingered the scraggly hairs of his white mustache.

Gault knotted his fingers into fists. Stocker would be liking that speech, probably would be writing about it in the same letters home that told of his firmness in meeting insubordination from a certain Sergeant-major Gault. For it was Stocker who had pressed the charges against Gault—charges of disrespect to officers.

"That is all, Gault," the major said.

John Gault did not move. His lean, bony jaw was slanted, eyes locked with disgust as he stared at Stocker. In a moment the triumph will come through, he thought. He'll show his mockery, and when he does—

"That is all, Gault!" Major Mayo snapped.

Saluting mechanically, John Gault turned toward the door. Full weight of the summer's sun beat against his shoulders as he left the building and he paused, unconsciously scanning the skyline discernible from inside the fort. Dust hung gauzy and unmoving. Each carefully sharpened upright log showed distinct and clear. The gate was closed, though a plumage of dust showed where troops were drilling outside. And from long habit he listened briefly to the shouted commands of the drill sergeants.

Then he remembered and his lips flattened. He turned suddenly, anger smoldering within him.

HIP LIGHTON, lush-bearded sergeant of E Troop, stood waiting at far corner of the headquarter building. His faded blue eyes touched Gault, slid away, and came back.

"How'd it go, Johnny?"

Gault grinned without humor. "Like you'd bet," he said bleakly. "Show an officer how the pretty theories that wow the women in Maryland will get him killed out here, and you've got trouble. Convince your troops and—"

"He made it stick, then?"

"I got busted to the grass."

Hip Lighton swore savagely. He gripped Gault's arm and squeezed it in sympathy.

"Got a spare plug, Hip?"

Startled, Hip Lighton fished a plug of black eating tobacco from his shirt pocket. He watched as Johnny Gault bit out his first chew.

"Never knew you to chaw, John," he said blankly.

"Never knew a lot of things myself, Hip," Gault said bluntly. "Takes a good court-

martial to show a man. Like how little soldiering does if a man don't wear brass to back it up. You see good men die and you remember. More men die and you get a little more savvy. And then—"

"And then some cocksure little weasel thinks he knows it all," Lighton put in savagely. "'Give 'em saber steel and ride 'em down,' he says. Like he was fightin' on some parade ground and they wasn't outnumberin' us forty to one. Why, the first time he tries that they'll butcher his whole command!"

Gault worked the unfamiliar tobacco into his jaw. "We been friends, Hip," he said. "I'll be re-assigned, but don't put in for me. Pass the word to Buck and to Pete Hennessey."

"Why, Johnny? You're the best damned soldier—"

"I was, maybe," Gault said soberly. "But where'd it get me? So now I'm just goin' along for the ride. Brass counts, so brass can swing it. This soldier is dead weight from here on in."

Lighton scowled. A faint commotion stirred the languid air, and Gault stiffened, half turning in his straining to hear. The sound grew louder. Hip Lighton's mouth was open. Both men twisted to peer toward the south, where a misty haze of hill and sky and dun-colored brush lifted above the stockade pale.

"Trouble!" Gault breathed softly. "Them's Henry's repeaters bangin' away. Old She-Wolf has got himself a target." He whirled and began running toward the headquarters shack.

THE MAJOR and all three lieutenants were already plugging the doorway. A bugle began sounding sharp, breathless urgency into the brassy heat.

"Sounds like—" Gault began, then stopped. He was no longer sergeant-major, he remembered abruptly. Was no longer anyone that counted. For a moment he stood hesitant, then turned on his heel.

"May be that column of reinforcements from Fort Laramie," Major Mayo said to nobody in particular. "But I was to have been notified. . . . Lieutenant Fyer, take C and A Troops. Watch for a trap. Lieutenant Stocker, take E and follow at one thousand yards. If Chief She-Wolf is in force don't risk your troop trying to rescue that column. Let them fight to your position."

The bugle panted across the compound and poured a fiery tension into Gault. He twisted, watching as men ran silently, grimly, precise in each practiced motion. Lighton was already gone. Standing on the outside of the preparation, Gault felt an emptiness spread through him. He fought against it, fanning an anger and contempt within.

"Sergeant!" Major Mayo shouted.

Gault saw that the major was talking to him. He pulled up sharply.

"Trooper Gault, sir," he said bitterly. "Remember?"

The major's jaw tightened as he stared unbelievingly. Then a dark rush of blood stained his features. "Damn you, John Gault, don't try that outraged innocence on me! You've soldiered enough to know that getting busted doesn't spell anything. I thought you had guts enough to take it and not whimper around like a wet-eared school boy! You got out of line and got busted. That's over. Now I need a good man with Indian-savvy—"

"Lieutenant Stocker is the authority, sir," Gault said. "He can—"

"That's enough, Gault! We've been friends for a long time, you and I. I'm trying to remember that."

Abruptly, the major whirled and strode into his quarters.

Gault stared after him, a curious mixture of pride and uneasiness twisting him. He'd been in the field under Major Mayo more times than he could remember. Mutual respect had forged a sure bond between them. And now—

Turning, Gault watched Lieutenant Fyer take his place at the head of A Troop. The seasoned officer was grim-jawed. A short-barrel carbine jutted from the crook of his left arm. Seeing Gault, he nodded briefly and reined away. A Troop followed in column of twos. Dust hazed from chomping hoofs as C Troop fell into line.

Farther back, Lieutenant Stocker was

holding E, his gray mount fidgeting with impatience. Then Stocker's command was ringing out, "Forward, ho!" and E Troop moved toward the gate, then out.

They should have taken him. Gault swore soundlessly. Damn! They should have used his bit, ordered him to join a troop. But they hadn't.

He spat into the sand and tried to find solace in thought of what She-Wolf's craft would make of Stocker's command. But even that gave him but small satisfaction, and he turned toward his quarters to pack his gear before some other sergeant took over.

DISTANT GUNFIRE played against his hearing with the persistency of a June mosquito. Gault crossed to the door, trying to measure the flow of battle by sound alone. Major Mayo was on the catwalk of the stockade wall peering southward with glasses. Troopers were scattered along the logs, carbines at hand. Gault wavered, then turned back inside.

The sounds became steadily louder as Fyer's troops joined the fracas and helped them fight toward the fort. Far-off cries streaked across the ripple of rifle fire. Thin and high, a bugle sang defiantly. Men along the stockade began firing.

Suddenly, high-pitched screaming ripped out above everything else and then faded into the distance. Gault knew that the Indians were streaming back into their endless hills. He stepped out into the blaze of heat in time to watch the first troopers coming in through the gate.

Green recruits, he saw instantly. Untrained men, most of them not even sure in their McClellan saddles. Stocker brought in his contingent, arrogantly erect in the saddle with the contempt of the experienced soldier for the green one. Seeing the man's pride, Gault swore aloud.

"Damn near murder, if you ask me," he said harshly. "Hand a man a rifle he's never shot, stick him on a horse he can't ride, ring him with more howlin' Indians than he's ever seen before, and he's supposed to—"

Two-thirds of the recruits twisted to stare. He had marked it right, Gault noted quickly—the fear, the hurt, the heartsickness that was still raw. Some of them started to nod.

Major Mayo's features swelled purple. But before he could find words, Lieutenant Stocker's rage sliced like saber steel: "That's enough, Gault!"

Gault shrugged and spat tobacco juice that thumped against the sands. Stocker leaned forward, obviously fighting for control.

"Get to your quarters, Gault!"

Gault grinned slowly and turned away. Half the recruits were watching him, he sensed, and sympathized with him because he had voiced the truth that each one knew. And that sympathy kept Lieutenant Stocker away.

Major Mayo was ruthless—ten days at stable police for Gault.

Gault shrugged. He'd expected at least that. He made it a point to speak to each new recruit whenever opportunity offered, and the ten days became twenty . . . thirty.

MAJOR MAYO was slumped at his table, a tired, worn old man when John Gault presented himself. Lieutenant Stocker stood against the back wall.

"The major sent for Trooper Gault, sir?"

Major Mayo nodded. "When you going to snap out of it, Johnny?" he asked wearily. "How long is this one-man war with the army going to continue?"

Gault did not answer. Major Mayo sighed and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger.

"Johnny, you've made yourself idol to half the troops here. You've worked at it, and I've watched you. And I've watched your guardhouse-lawyer advice poison good men. You know what you are doing to the morale of this command, Johnny. And that makes it all the worse. It's deliberate. Now this whole post is rotten as a frosted melon. Most of it is your doing."

The major paused, his eyes heavy with unvoiced pleading. When Gault held silent, he continued, "Seven men died when She-Wolf hit their column. Four of the wounded died later. A bad way for a recruit to start —a thing he can't forget. Only hard drilling and hard discipline will sharpen a man into

a fighter who can ignore casualties. We work at that from the top and you whittle it all away at the bottom."

Lieutenant Stocker stirred, stepped away from the wall. Gault half turned, watching him.

"You hate me, Gault, and I don't exactly love you," Stocker said. "But this fort is in jeopardy because you and I can't see eye to eye." Stocker held out his hand, palm up. "I'm willing to forget, Gault."

A fierce triumph twisted Gault's face. He ignored the hand. "There's nothing between us, Lieutenant," he said softly. "And when the time comes, I reckon I'll be able to take care of my own hide."

Stocker dropped his hand swiftly. Major stood up. "All right, Johnny!" All warmth and friendliness were gone from the major's voice. "Keep it up and I'll have you chained and under armed guard day and night! I'll—"

"The major is threatening me, sir?"

"Get out of here! The day will come when your life will depend upon the fighting men of this troop, Gault. And then you'll wish to God you hadn't softened them up! Believe me, that day's coming!"

Saluting, Gault strode woodenly to the door and outside. He hadn't wanted to hurt Mayo, he told himself grimly. But damned if he'd soften just to make things easier for Stocker. He lifted his head, scanning the brush and slopes beyond the stockade. She-Wolf was inching in, giving weight to Major Mayo's apprehension. She-Wolf and his Sioux were closing their grip, squeezing steadily. When full attack came, the last whites would be gone from the Bozeman.

He was on his bunk when Buck Hennessey came to the doorway.

"Haying detail, Gault. Get out there!"

Gault nodded.

"Take your carbine. Or you saving all your fighting for lieutenants?"

There was little friendship between them now. Somewhere along the line, Buck Hennessey had thrown in with the brass. Gault nodded and crossed to get his carbine. Without being told, he checked it carefully. This business of cutting winter forage in the hill meadows was a daily gauntlet of fire. Despite the two or three full troop escort, there still was sniping from coulee and distant slope.

Lieutenant Stocker was mounted and waiting. He edged his mount forward.

"I asked for you, Gault," he said pointedly. "Your record says you used to be one of the best marksmen in the troop. I want you to show some of these new men just how much damage a fifty caliber slug can do."

Gault climbed into the lead wagon. Pinko Daily held the reins. He grinned and saw Pinko's happy flush. The kid had taken to him for some reason.

"You think we'll see any of them today, Johnny?" Pinko queried guardedly.

Gault nodded. "Sure, kid. That's why the looie wanted me along. Maybe I'll catch an arrow and save him the trouble of having me hanged."

But Pinko didn't laugh.

Gault threw a quick glance across his shoulder at the recruit. Pinko Daily's lips were thinned hard against his teeth.

GAULT AND THE others wound through the gate and along the hard-packed valley floor. He slumped back nonchalantly, pretending not to notice the stricken rapidity with which Pinko's glance shifted from hill to hill to faraway crest.

Gault tried to reassure him. "Maybe it's yes and maybe it's no, Pinko," he said quietly. "It doesn't matter too much. When a man's number is up, he goes trailing. If it isn't up, there ain't the Indian made that can wipe him out."

Pinko Daily stared for a moment, then nodded solemnly. The stockade dropped behind. Lieutenant Stocker had his flank guards well out, sending two troopers feeling ahead into the ominous quiet of the hills. The Sioux were there, waiting, watching. Each man knew it, and waited. One moment's unguarded complacency would bring Sioux warriors springing from the very sands. It had happened far too often for the lesson to be forgotten. Pinko Daily's head began shuttling again as he stared apprehensively about.

The narrow mouth of a long winding valley opened to them, belly-deep with lush growing blue-stem. Gault wached Stocker

as the lieutenant drew rein while studying the deceptively peaceful vale. Then Stocker gave order to begin cutting.

Gault took a scythe, driving himself until sweat ran free and a freshness came of his coursing blood. Men scythed. Other men gathered the green by armloads and carried it to the wagons. No time for curing here. That would be done at the post.

Gault paused to wipe his brow and for the first time noticed that Lieutenant Stocker was intently watching one of his scouts. Stocker growled and sent a man riding to catch the message.

Scythe-men stopped their cutting and took up arms. Escart troopers mounted and sat waiting.

"Eight or ten Indians, sir," the returning messenger reported. "They don't seem to know we're here."

Lieutenant Stocker laughed shortly. He rubbed his bearded jaw with the back of his hand.

"Ain't a hawk flies over these hills but what the Sioux know it," Gault murmured warning. Them babies are just playing foxy."

Stocker turned a calculating glance upon Gault, and Gault could detect the seesaw battle—ambition weighted against discretion within him.

"If they don't know we're here," Stocker mused aloud, "and if about twenty troopers should flush them from the far side, they'd come running smack dab against these wagons. Maybe a few prisoners—"

Gault mocked the officer with a crooked grin. Stocker glared. Then he raised his arm, giving quick, terse orders.

Gault tossed his scythe away and lifted his carbine. He wiped his palms and turned a sober, knowing glance at the frozen surf of broken hill-line. The end had come. He knew it. Worrying the tobacco in his jaw, he spat elaborately.

Eight or ten Indians, baiting a trap that was splitting their forces. And somewhere behind those silent hill crests old She-Wolf would have warriors by the score. It was the old story, the one stratagem that seemed never to fail.

"It won't work, you think?" Pinko Daily whispered hoarsely. "You don't think—"

Gault laughed grimly. "Hell, Pinko, you'll be a hero! Every paper in the East will tell how you died defending the Union against these savage redskins!"

Pinko Daily's face hardened, grew rigid and stiff with terror. "God, Johnny, I don't want to die!" The whimper became a shrill wail. "I don't want to die yet!"

Lieutenant Stocker twisted in his saddle. "Quiet that man, Gault! Knock him out if you have to!"

"Johnny," Pinko pleaded. He fell to his knees, gripping Gault's legs. "Please, Johnny. I don't want to die!"

A murmur of agitation spread through the men. Stocker swore and reined his mount toward Pinko Daily and Gault. Gault saw him coming. Young Daily's hands clutched at him, begged for the thing he could not give. He felt a growing sympathy for the panicked trooper. Strangely, Major Mayo's prophecy came to his mind. The major had said that the day would come when he'd regret softening the troopers.

Stocker pulled his mount close to Daily, leaning sideways out of the saddle. Staring challengingly at the officer, Gault suddenly shifted his carbine and fired skyward. Echoes ran in crackling volley between the hills.

"Gault!" Stocker's features were convulsed with rage. "You bloody damned fool!"

"They know we're here now," Gault said bleakly. "Your little surprise party won't work, so how about gettin' out of here?"

"No! By God—"

Gault moved savagely. Stepping close, he clubbed the lieutenant with his carbine. Stocker gagged, face draining of color, and then leaned slowly forward and fell.

Without a second glance at the fallen officer, Gault whipped about. "We're getting out of here—now!" he grated. "I know this setup. Haynes, Buckrow, Jergensmeir, Woitzel—you men head back for the post as hard as you can ride. Tell Mayo to get help on the way to meet us. Maybe we won't need it, but—"

The troopers named gaped uncertainly. Gault lifted his carbine. "Ride, damn you!" he roared. "I'm in this up to my ears now.

Won't be no worse if I knock a few squareheads out of their saddles!"

The four reined about and began spurring. Sergeant Hennessey sidled toward Gault with a fixed, blank smile. Gault waved him away with the carbine muzzle.

"Look after Stocker," he said. "The rest of you get those wagons ready."

He lifted his arm, motioning the scouts in. And then he noticed that the left flank man was already racing toward them.

A SPATTER of rifle fire sounded from the rear. Gault turned, cocking his head to hear better. His couriers had run into trouble. Whether any of them would live through it, there was no telling. Then the right flank was racing crazily from the far rim of the valley. And he thought again of Major Mayo's prophetic curse.

"Take a look, you heroes!" he shouted. "Here comes Stocker's 'eight or ten' Indians!"

A man moaned apprehensively. The winding valley was suddenly filled from slope to slope with galloping warriors.

"Corral those wagons!" Gault shouted. "Hold your fire!"

Sergeant Hennessey raced to a team, helping a nervous rooky wheel them around. The left-flank man came up, sliding his mount until it slammed against the wagon barricade.

"Half the Sioux nation!" he panted. His glance caught Lieutenant Stocker propped against a wad of cut hay and he twisted toward Gault.

"Inside," Gault snapped. "And snub that horse close. He'll stop more lead than all the hay in Montana territory."

"But—" the flank guard started to protest.

"You ain't going no place, brother! Snub him tight against that wheel gap and get behind him!"

The other flank was still trying for it. Gault saw. Riding low over his mount's pumping neck, beating with his one free arm. Then the mount folded. The straining front legs went limp. Man and horse dipped and went end over end. A trooper cried out. The screeching wave of red warriors swirled past the fallen trooper. Dust billowed as a score of them wheeled and milled momentarily. Shots came from the melee.

"Hold your fire there, Mason!"

It was Stocker's voice, and Gault turned to see the lieutenant waving a warning at a man. Then Stocker's glance lifted, and Gault felt his stare. Neither spoke. Neither wavered.

"You got word back?"

Gault shrugged. "Four started. They ran into fire."

The Indian charge presented a floodcrest of invulnerable fury. They were waving rifles and lances and yelling, shaking the very earth with their ferocity and numbers. Gault stared grimly, then turned to glance toward the flanks. It was then that he saw the contingent coming from the rear, without fanfare or sound. They were grim, intent, murderous.

"From the rear, Lieutenant," he called quickly. "They don't know we've spotted them yet."

"Volley fire at my command," Stocker barked. "Shoot low. Drop their horses."

Gault glanced quickly at the lowering sun. He saw Pinko Daily and grinned at him. Daily licked his lips, and his knuckles were bloodless about his carbine. But he grinned fleetingly back at Gault.

"Fire!" came the command.

A LICKING whip of muzzle flame leaped along the line of wagons. Cavalry mounts whinnied and shied. But havoc had seized the Indian line. Horses rolled. Indians bounded up, loosing arrows, flinging up Henry repeaters and Sharps and a few Spencers.

Stocker shouted shrilly. Volley fire raked the main body of redskins. Screaming, the Indians wheeled, drove in, then sheered off again as the steady fire chewed at their ranks.

A gray cavalry mount reared high, screaming its agony. A trooper raised to grasp the reins and went down with half his face a bloodied blotch. Another mount leaped half across a wagon and died there, threshing about in its death throes.

"Give 'em hell, Pinko!" Gault shouted. "I'm too young to die!"

Pinko Daily aimed and fired, nodding his head to let Gault know he had heard.

A brave leaped into a wagon suddenly, springing up from the scythed meadow as though by magic. His sharp steel ax whirled and buried itself in a trooper's skull. Lieutenant Stocker's shot dropped him across the trooper he had killed.

A second brave wormed closer, snaking on his belly. Gault saw the muscles gather for a rush and shot him through the head.

Stocker's glance caught and held Gault. The end had come. Both recognized it. One assault, possibly two, the little wagonbox fortification might survive. But not beyond that.

Gault spat. He had gained what? he wondered briefly. Proof that he knew more about Indian fighting than Stocker. And in proof of that, what had he really gained? Abruptly he grinned at Stocker, giving him credit. Maybe the lieutenant didn't know too much about Indians, but he had guts.

The hills rang to the shrill, nerve-fraying screeching as the Sioux came in again. Zigzagging, blood-chilling in whipping eagle feathers and steel-tipped lances. Deadly, merciless, without fear. Fast, furious, bloody.

Gault never knew when his left arm dropped limp. He never knew when he first began that wild wordless yelling. His rifle bucked and smoked. With quarters too close for firing, he jabbed and hacked, clubbing with the barrel. And when the attack melted, he began firing methodically.

THE HIGH sweet tone of a distant bugle was more hoped for than heard. But the Indians were bunching, changing their tactics. Gault made out the quick staccato trill coming faintly downwind.

"Give 'em hell, lads!" he yelled. "This is their last try!"

The Indians came in a flood, without yelling—a ruthless charge to trample the little handfull of troopers into bloody dust before fading away into the hills again. And the troopers met them, firing at extreme range, firing again and again until the wagon barricade split the great tide. Churning and roaring, hacking and yelling, dying.

And then the Indians were past, riding hard down the valley. No trooper fired after them. The bugle sang again, closer now, shrill and yet soft with a promise that lifted men's hearts.

Major Mayo was at head of the relief column, Gault saw. And he saw Buckrow and Jergensmeir, the men he had sent for help. Both were searching him out with their eyes, and he knew they had reported him to Major Mayo. The right side of Stocker's tunic was black with blood where a bullet had taken him, but he held himself stiffly erect as he stepped forward to meet the column.

Gault watched wearily, emptied of all but a bone-dissolving fatigue. In a moment it would come, he knew. His army career gone. Arrest, humiliation, disgrace.

"Gault proved wiser than I," Stocker said steadily. "But for his courage in taking command, I would have lost every man here."

Stocker turned then, looking back at Gault. "I've a lot to learn about Indian fighting, Gault. I'd be grateful for your advice whenever you see I'm making a mistake."

Unwilling to believe what his senses were telling him, Gault gaped blankly at the lieutenant.

Major Mayo scowled and scratched his whiskered jowls.

"If I may recommend—" Stocker began.

Major Mayo cut him off. "Later, Lieutenant. . . . Sergeant Gault, get those men ready to return to the post."

Gault's head lifted. "Sergeant?"

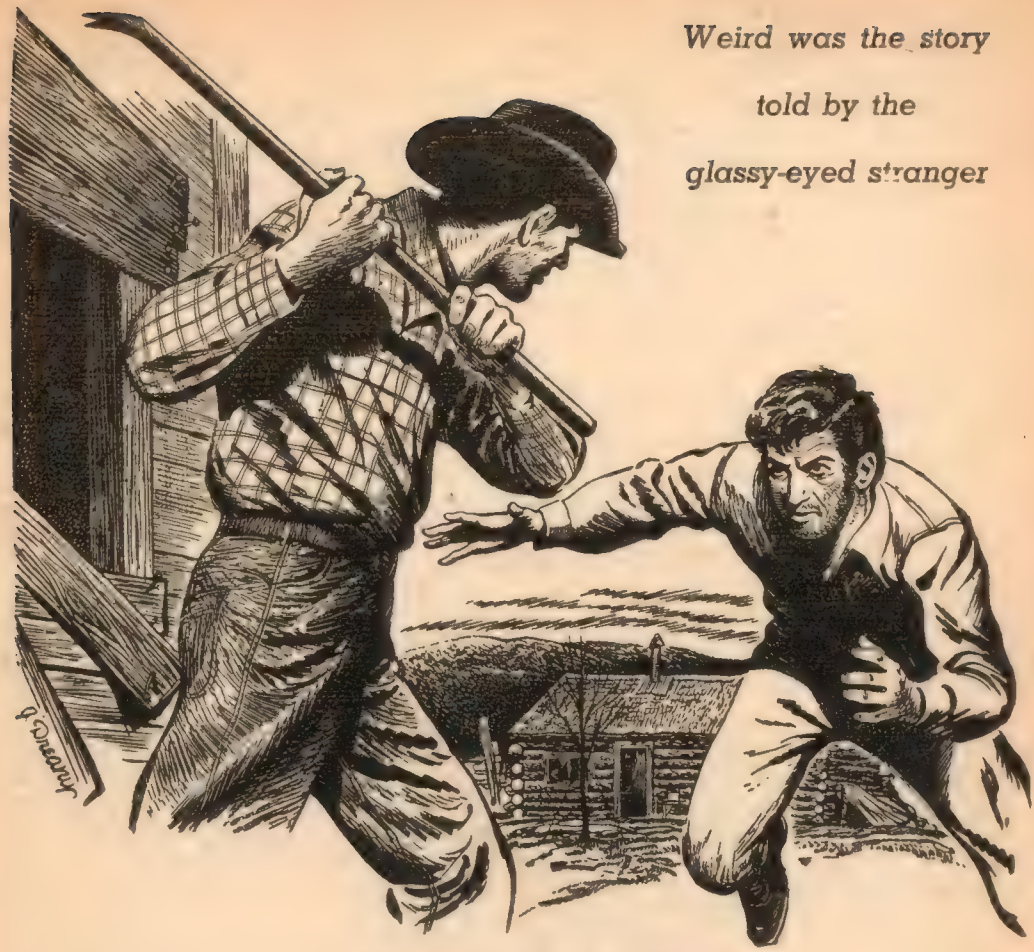
"You heard me! Get—Hell, you're wounded yourself . . . Sergeant Hennessey, get the unwounded lined up."

The bugle sighed clean and soft into the evening air as cavalry mounts were hitched to the hay wagons and the return trip began. Gault clasped his shot-torn arm closer to his chest and through a haze of pain grinned at Pinko Daily.

"I got four of them red devils," Daily bragged. "I tell you, Johnny—"

But Gault only grinned. ● ● ●

Weird was the story told by the glassy-eyed stranger



I swung the crowbar desperately

Hear the Warning Wind

By CY KEES

HE WAS gasping for breath and almost helpless with fear when he stumbled into my camp. His glassy eyes stared, and his face was as colorless as white paste.

"Don't—don't let me be alone," he begged, then collapsed flat on the ground, and passed out.

With the roar of the twisting Snake River in my ears, I made him as comfortable as possible. After wrapping him in my spare Army blankets, I put my own coat under his head.

Instinctively, I knew he wasn't lost. A lost person will get panicky and go near crazy with fear. But there won't be the

lines of horror, etched bone deep, such as were in this man's face, nor the chilling, animal-like stare that looks right through you. So it wasn't the unexpectedness of his coming that caused me to peer anxiously through the dark of the night to the surrounding trees.

It was the sure knowledge that, somewhere in those desolate miles of thick brush, jagged hills and falling water, something had terrorized my visitor to the point where he had run like a fear-crazed animal, just to get away.

Trying to make more light, I threw sticks of wood on the fire. The flames flared higher, disclosing a letter lying on the grass.

It must have fallen from his pocket when I lifted him off the ground. Curious, I picked it up. It was addressed to J. Hawkes, no return. Anxious to know more, I pulled out the single sheet. It was a short note, crudely printed.

NOW YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE THERE ALONE. GOOD. GO OFTEN OR YOU'LL GET WHAT HE GOT.

Just that, nothing more.

"I can stay here—you'll let me?" Ugly chills shot up my back, and I turned.

My visitor came crawling out of the blankets. His voice had been pleading, filled with an awful anxiety. I nodded and poured him coffee. His fingers shook bad when he took the tin cup, but I pretended not to notice. He stared into its blackness for a long time, then slowly he looked up.

"If you don't mind listening," he said, "I'd like—I've got to tell somebody!" His voice started low, dull, and rose sharply to the edge of hysteria.

"Sure, if it'll make you feel any better," I said quietly. For a long time, he stared bleakly into space, the coffee cooling, forgotten in his hand. He started, his voice low and steady, like he was relieved to share his load with someone else. Here is his story:

THE very first time I saw that homestead, it sent chills up my back. I don't know why, unless it's the lonely place where it huddles—on Wind River, about six miles above this spot.

Down here, Wind River makes a lot of noise, dropping as fast as it does, but up there it runs slow and quiet, as if it wants to hide all it's seen around that homestead. Thunderheads were rolling up, and I was looking for shelter.

There it sat, a cabin black from weather, with a barn close to the river, and a woodshed hunched up close to the rear of the house. Seemed queer to me right away, the way that shed was boarded up, the door and windows barred tight shut with cross pieces.

Like I say, the chills went up my back. And the closer I got, the creepier I felt. Don't know if you've ever noticed the way the wind changes in these mountains. Say, when you're feeling good and are relaxed, it can be the most soothing music in the world.

That day it sounded weird and haunting—kind of groaning in the tops of the trees. I was tempted to wheel my horse and get out fast when I spotted a man down near the river.

He stood outside the barn, head up, seeming to enjoy the feeling in the air. When he saw me, he just stared; didn't move at all. A big man, he was, with long hair and thick shoulders. His lips were wide and thin. Then I saw his eyes.

I shuddered. Maybe the way they looked was the reason he kept them almost closed, so that they wouldn't be seen and give him away. They were dark and shining, and—well, I only saw eyes like that once before.

That was one time I met a sheepherder bringing his dead son out of the mountains. The kid had been lost, and the herder had searched the woods for him. Eight days he'd looked, and he finally found the kid under a moonlit sky—bloated.

The herder's eyes were the same as this fellow's in one way. They had a crazy glitter in them, an ugly glitter.

It isn't that those eyes scared you, so much as haunted you. You knew they'd been through hell, and you might've helped their owner, if you could've gotten to him in time. But now they were too far gone, and you couldn't reach him any more to help him

get right again.

Maybe it's kinder that way, I don't know. Anyhow, he gave me a long lookover and slow smile.

"My name's Dard." His voice surprised me; it was low and pleasing, almost kindly. He pointed towards the barn. "Put your horse in there, and then come on up to the house."

Dard strode on up to the cabin fast, and I got the impression right away that he wanted to hide something, or give somebody some instructions on how to act. I wanted to get out of there, but the thunder rumbled louder, and the air had that damp smell that said rain wasn't far away.

Besides, my curiosity rose till I really wanted to find out what caused the peculiar atmosphere around the place. That curiosity had got me in a lot of trouble before, but I'd never learned to control it. After bedding my horse down, I walked slowly up to the cabin.

The taint of something dead hit my nose. But it wasn't coming from the house. It drifted down from somewhere upwind, and I guessed that a deer or some other animal had died and was rotting. That wasn't what made it so I had to drive myself closer to the cabin.

It was the ugly feeling that the smell—the stench of the dead—fitted the place just right.

First of all, it wasn't a well-tended homestead. Alfalfa hay tangled wildly over the broken-down fences, and the little patch of garden had never been tended. Hunks of rags clogged the broken window panes in the cabin, and the whole place looked overgrown and uncared for. Guess that's what made the little peach tree in the front of the cabin loom so big in my mind.

It held my interest because a lot of work and care had gone into that tree. Small and fragile, it stood in the middle of a big plot of worked ground. All alone, it looked helpless in all the wildness of the place. Through a window, I spotted Dard watching me, so I went on in.

"Looks like a storm," I said. Right then the rain hit the cabin with a rush of the elements.

DARD listened and went once to peer out into the darkness, but he never did answer me. Fact is, all during the meal, he didn't say a word. But every once in a while, I could feel he was studying me from out of those dark eyes. Eyes that glittered in the light of the gas lamp.

They made me afraid of him, and I never turned my back to him. Still he didn't seem to mean any harm. He even seemed kind of friendly in his quiet way. But I just couldn't tell. It was while we were cleaning up the dishes that I spotted the picture standing on a rough board cabinet in the corner—a picture of a woman, young and unsmiling, but beautiful in an odd kind of way.

Her face was thin and looked as if it would be pale in real life. Somehow, after looking at it once, my eyes kept going back to it.

Dard caught me staring at it. His eyes dulled for a minute, and from the way he studied me, I knew it was time to stop looking—and quick.

It wasn't that the eyes were threatening me, but by damn, believe me, I knew it was time to quit. He fixed me up a bed on a spare straw tick, and I lay for a long time in the dark, trying to figure out what might have made him so morbid and quiet.

The wind found cracks all around the cabin and groaned through them. Heavy rain kept hitting in rushes. Usually, that makes me feel snug and safe, inside on a night like that. But right then, I would've felt safer huddled under a bushy fir tree, anywhere out in these desolate miles.

I knew what scared me. It was that feeling that so much that was ugly and awful lay back of Dard's dark eyes.

Something connected with the broken panes, the picture on the cabinet, and maybe that peach tree, which would now be cold and wet outside the door. Finally I slept, with a jumble of evil dreams.

Already up when I awoke, Dard cooked breakfast while I watched him, pretending sleep. It was still morning, but it was light then, and it made my wild imaginings look foolish. I smiled to myself and glanced at the cabinet. The picture was gone.

My smile froze. Of course, it could have been just coincidence that Dard had moved it while I slept, for some other reason than that he was hiding something.

But it wasn't coincidence. Down deep, I knew that. And whatever Dard was hiding, I knew, put that crazy light in his eyes. My curiosity really was aroused then; I resolved to find out what it was.

During breakfast, Dard loosened up a little, like he had dreaded the night, and was glad to have it over for another day. But he didn't mention anything about himself and his life there. He just said a little about the storm. His frying had made a lot of smoke in the closed cabin, and he opened a window to let it out.

Right away, the smell filtered in—the dead smell that I'd noticed the night before. Dard stiffened and closed the window again—fast! Turning slowly, he stared at me, long and closely.

I pretended I hadn't noticed anything, but I could feel cold sweat breaking out on me. That smell didn't come from a dead deer or any other animal. That thought lashed right through me.

The odor was different. This odor had an ugly, sickeningly different smell. The truth pounded at my brain for a long time before I'd let it in.

Somewhere close, a human body lay hidden, rotting, and I was in the same room with the man who knew all the answers as to why it was so. He had to know, or he wouldn't be so sneaky, so secretive. Suddenly, the pieces that had been puzzling me the night before started to fall into place.

THAT woman in the picture was a fascinating person, one who could have been loved no end by a person who'd lived alone like Dard. But you know how love is in a wild, uncivilized place like this. If the loved one is good, it brings out the best possible characteristics in a partner.

But let that love turn to hate, and right away it brings out the worst. When you're bucking nature like you do out here, men have stronger feelings. The pieces fell right into place.

It could have started with small things, I thought; little differences that couldn't be ironed out. A silent man like Dard wouldn't say anything, would let them pile up until his love soured.

It's a lot to expect, a man and a woman, isolated like this, finding happiness when they never can get away from each other. So I had it figured out.

Love for the woman in the picture had turned to hate, murderous hate. Gradually hate had built up until it'd burst into violence, that would later be a trap of guilt. All morning, I watched Dard closely, because if a man can cross the line to kill once, the next time comes easier.

It puzzled me that Dard hadn't hidden the body, done something to hide the crime. Again my curiosity kept me there. I could have left. It was still storming, but I had plenty of daylight to ride to Black Hill lookout, where I'd been heading.

Curiosity can be a wicked thing up here, but I was so worked up over matters then, I didn't care. I waited for my chance to draw Dard into conversation, hoping he'd give something away. After I fed and watered my horse, I figured I saw my opportunity. He sat, huddled close to the stove, his head in his hands.

"Beats me how you get wood out of that woodshed," I said. "All boarded up the way it is." Dard stiffened and muscles corded his arms. But he said nothing.

It made me a little sore, his being so damned close-mouthed. For a minute, I got reckless.

"Smells bad out there," I said. "Something must've died up the river." Dard whirled around, and his eyes glittered dangerously. For a long moment while I wished to hell I'd kept my mouth shut, he looked right at me. And I couldn't look away.

"I didn't notice anything," he said, in that soft, kindly voice—the voice that lied because it covered so much.

"I could have been mistaken," I said quickly, but I knew I wasn't fooling him any. Just the way he looked at me, he knew I guessed that he was hiding something big. Maybe that's why it surprised me at noon when he started talking.

"I've got to go up in the timber today," he

told me. He didn't say why. "I'll be gone overnight, but you're welcome to stay if you like."

It sent cold waves over me, just to think of staying in that cabin alone at night—with that smell in the air outside. Being there with Dard for company was bad enough. But a plan filtered through my head, and I nodded.

"Be better if I start in the morning," I said. "If you're sure you don't mind."

That settled it, and he pulled out right after dinner. He saddled a horse and packed one mule. He just waved at me when he pulled out, like he was happy to see the last of me.

Hard as it was, I waited until I was sure he was far gone. I felt guilty about what I had to do, but I was too interested to stop. I looked the country over close to make sure Dard was gone for good, and then started hunting.

In the bureau I found the picture of the woman. I stared at it for a long time. There had been a fascination about her from a distance. Up close, she was like a magnet, a strange expression in her eyes making it hard to jerk your own away.

How she ever got out to this lonely spot baffled me. I put the picture back and moved outside. Close to the front, I stopped and looked at the little peach tree, wet, and swaying slowly back and forth.

The wind—I've told you about the wind—it was making a kind of dirge in the trees. Sad, haunting music that took hold of you and couldn't be shaken off.

I STOOD for a long time in front of the peach tree. The rain had beaten the ground around it down smooth. There wasn't a clod in it. It had been worked often and well. Somehow, I figured the answer to some of the questions burning my brain might be found in that tree, if it could just tell what it had seen. In the meantime, I'd have to look somewhere else.

The woodshed. I shuddered, just thinking of going into that dark shack, but I had to. Maybe you can't understand that, but I just had to.

As I moved closer to it, the smell—that ugly dead smell—kept getting stronger and stronger. My heart pounded and I couldn't swallow often enough, but I moved closer.

I couldn't see anything. The shed was boarded up tight. And the planks weren't nailed on lightly either. Big thick spikes bristled from every board. I needed a tool to force an opening.

Getting farther away relieved me so much it was like a heavy load off my shoulders. But that made it just that much harder to go back when I found a crowbar to rip off the crosspieces.

The work of tearing them down made it easier because it took my mind off what I'd find inside. I didn't have any doubts any more.

I knew there was a corpse in there. There was no mistaking that smell that hung heavily in the air. I jerked away the last bar and braced myself to open the door. Something rustled behind me, and I whirled.

I almost screamed, he scared me so bad. Ugly chill waves kept sweeping down my back, and I couldn't say a word. Dard stood there, and I knew I'd fallen into a trap.

His eyes were practically closed—just two glistening dark slits. He grinned, a horrible grin that was pure ice.

"I kind of thought you might want to look around," he said. His voice was no longer kindly; it had a sinister, gloating sound. His grin widened.

"I got a place up on the hill where I can look down with field glasses," he said. "Came in handy before, damned handy that place, and I watched you all the time." He laughed, a humorless laugh that made my knees buckle.

"But it's lucky for you. You wouldn't have wanted to see what you'd find in there." Dard laughed again, and without warning, he charged.

I still had the crowbar in my hand, and I gave all I had in one desperate swing.

His arm shot up to ward it off, but it wasn't enough. Bone crunched in his arm, and the bar bounced off his head. With a sick moan, he collapsed on the ground.

Just as fast as I could, I saddled my horse and got the hell out of there. Never in my life was I so glad to get back to the trail, away from a place. I called the authorities

from Freedom, and they came right away.

Hard as I tried to get out of it, they made me go back with them. If I'd have known that, I would've kept my mouth shut, but it was too late then. The closer we got, the more scared I got. With two men, strong men, the place terrorized me.

We sneaked into the cabin to take Dard by surprise. We wouldn't have had to bother. His arm in a rude sling, he groaned and squirmed in misery on the bed. Leaving his deputy to do what he could for Dard, the sheriff went with me to the woodshed.

It scared me more now than when I was alone. I felt guilty besides being scared. Dard had helped me when I needed it, and all I'd done was hurt him with my damned snooping. If I hadn't got so nosy, I wouldn't have known any of it. The sheriff hesitated himself before he swung open the door.

WE BOTH backed away fast. It was a horrible sight. I was sick by the side of the woodshed. When I got through, I was sick again. The dead man had been there quite a while, and the rats had got to him.

Later on, when I could think again, it surprised me that it was a man. All the time, I'd been expecting to find the woman in the picture.

At Dard's trial, the whole story came out, and I found out the secret of the peach tree.

First of all, the woman had been Dard's wife. A couple years ago, Dard rode down to get supplies, and they met then.

Her name was Barbara. She was beautiful, but strange and hard to know. Nobody really understood her till Dard came along.

Maybe they were made to live alone, isolated from everybody else. But the following months were happier for both than either had ever thought possible. They loved the loneliness of this country, each finding in the other everything that was needed.

Then one day, that mess we found in the woodshed came along. Eager to share what they had, Dard and Barbara made him welcome. He stayed a couple of days and acted friendly enough. But Dard delayed going into the timber until his visitor had gone.

But Dard still wasn't careful enough. Before he'd gone an hour, the stranger came out from where he'd been hiding, waiting for his chance. Maybe he was lonely too and couldn't help himself. I don't know.

Dard wasn't supposed to get back till that evening. But one of the little things that he and Barbara shared brought him back in a desperate rush of speed.

On the first knoll that overlooked the homestead, Dard always stopped and looked down at the cabin through field glasses. Barbara would stand outside and wave a handkerchief. She couldn't see him, but she'd guess about the time he'd get there and would wave the handkerchief.

Sounds silly maybe, but it was one of the little things that made life bearable in a lonely place such as that—something they shared and enjoyed. Always before, when he got there and looked through his glasses, Barbara was waving. That morning, she wasn't.

Almost frantic with fear, Dard guessed what it meant. He killed his horse getting back, but he was too late. In his passion, the man had choked her. Maybe he was starting to see the horrible thing he'd done. Then he turned and saw Dard in the doorway.

Anyhow, he begged and crawled around, pleading for mercy, but he didn't get any. I don't know how hard he died, but Dard was strong and Barbara, who made life worth living for him, was lying crushed on the floor.

Probably already crazy when he killed the man, Dard got worse with all the terrible memories he had to live with. It made him do queer things, like putting the corpse in the woodshed. Dard had the crazy idea he wouldn't let the killer sleep in the same ground in which Barbara was buried.

He buried her next to his cabin door where he could have her close. He planted a peach tree to mark the exact spot. That way he had something to tend, something to care for. He let the rest of the homestead go to pot.

I felt a little relieved after the trial. They judged Dard insane and had him put away. Dard asked to see me before he left.

How I've wished since I hadn't gone—just run anywhere, in order to get away from him. But that old curiosity was back, luring me to go see what he wanted.

His eyes hated me as soon as they saw me, and the more he talked, the more hating

they got. I couldn't face him any more at the end, couldn't do anything but listen.

"You should be satisfied now, but I'm going to change that," Dard said. "You're going to find out what it's like to be up there alone." His eyes glittered. "Some day I'm going to get out of the asylum. When I do, I'm heading straight back and look at that tree. It better be well tended because, if it isn't, I'm coming after you, wherever you are." His eyes were dark slits again

"Whenever you're alone in the mountains, you'll have to look out in the dark and think maybe I'm close, ready to jump you. There's only one way to save yourself. See that her grave's taken care of. Well taken care of."

I knew that every word he spoke was the truth, and I started making plans right then to take good care of the tree and the grave.

The first time I didn't notice it so much. I hated walking past the barn because that kind of made me feel surrounded. I tried to ignore the woodshed, the stillness of the cabin and concentrate on the tree.

It's dead quiet up there except for the wind. That infernal damned wind just won't quit. Always I get a letter from Dard, and I have to go. Every step is hell, and just being close to the place freezes me with fear.

The smell of death is gone, but something new, something even more awful is there, taking its place. Something I can't describe, but it's there; I can feel it every second

You see, whenever I get close to that little tree in front of the cabin, it isn't the feeling that I'm alone that makes ugly, icy chills go up my back. It's the haunting, damnable certainty that I'm *not* alone.

My visitor's voice ended strong, but almost immediately, he began sobbing with his face buried in his hands. I didn't know what to say. There was nothing I could say. The fire burned low, and I threw on more wood.

I don't know how much of his story was real, how much was wild imagination. But one thing I knew now was true.

In the tops of the pines, black against the sky, the wind was moaning.

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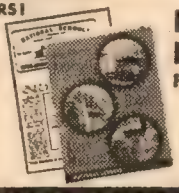

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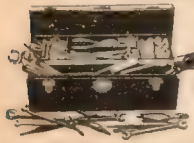

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Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe were just a pair of harmless cowpokes . . . until all hell broke loose in Ronde Basin

HOLIDAY

By LEE FLOREN

CHAPTER I

Desolation Range

THREE wolves had a Circle 9 heifer cornered and were ready to pull her down. The tired Hereford made low moaning sounds as she eyed her circling canine enemies.

Tortilla Joe reined in and listened.

"Somewhere a cow is bawlin', Buckshots. She is over the hill, no?"

Lanky Buck McKee let his boots dangle free of stirrups. "Maybe a cow is mired in a bog hole?"

His heavy-set Mexican partner shook his head. "There are no bog holes around here. This country she is have the dry weather." His dark eyes took in the distant mountains ahead—the scarp mountains of the Arizona desert. "Not enough water even that a man he can spit!"

Suddenly Buck McKee stiffened. "Wolves, Tortilla Joe! I heard one snarl! You hear him, too?"

"I hears him, Buck."

Already Buck was out of his saddle and was pulling his Winchester free of its saddle-holster

"Wait for me, Buckshots!"

They were in a wide dry-wash. Sand was thick and *chamiso* and catclaw grew on the wide floor of the desert, with an occasional *junipero* tree rising over the chaparral. To their south was a small rise with greasewood and sagebrush on its flank. The heifer was beyond this hill in another sand-wash.

Buck checked his rifle, saw that a cartridge was in the barrel, and snapped shut the loading-gate. With Tortilla Joe following, he climbed the hill at a run, bent over to be hidden by the greasewood. Behind him his fat Mexican partner panted and puffed, but still he kept close to the rangy Buck, whose long legs took two steps to Tortilla Joe's three.

As they neared the top of the hill the sounds made by the heifer became louder. Along the summit of the hill ran a rimrock ledge and Buck reached this with Tortilla Joe puffing behind him. Squatting behind the ledge of rock, they caught their breath. Then Buck looked gingerly over the ledge and down into the sand-wash.

Tortilla Joe murmured, "Three wolves—lobos, no?" He did not wait for a reply. "The leetle heifer she ees played-out an' they keel her. We come at the right time, no?"

"Yes," Buck said quietly. "You take the big dog wolf on the west, Tortilla Joe. Me, I'll lay my sights against the other dog, and when the bitch starts to run we'll unload on her."

"*Si.* Tell me when?"

THE wind was blowing toward them, therefore the wolves had not got their scent. Tortilla Joe had made no understatement when he had said the heifer was played-out. One wolf had torn her right flank Blood dripped down onto the sand. Slobber hung from her jaws and she shook her head slowly. She was a Hereford—evidently she had good blood, judging from the big frame and the amount of beef on her Despite the drouth she was in pretty good flesh

But she had reached the end of her trail Her rump almost rubbing a cut-coulee's edge, she could travel no further; she had selected this spot to make her death-stand And death was the only thing that awaited her. The wolves realized they had her cornered, and were savage for blood. And mixed with this savagery was a wild satanic cunning. They would make her suffer before they slashed in, fangs bared, and tore her windpipe open.

She moaned, and she pawed the ground, head low. But the gesture lacked energy, for she was very tired. The wolves did not see the rifles of Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe ease over the rocky parapet and find them on their sights. Buck's wolf was sitting down, doggish tongue lolling out of hungry jaws. He watched the heifer with canine amusement. The bitch moved back and forth, traveling between the two dogs Tortilla Joe's intended victim stood silent, also watching the heifer.

Buck murmured, "You got your sights on him, pard?"

"*Si,*" Tortilla Joe said quietly.

Buck squinted and aimed at the dog-wolf's shoulders. The wolf had his back to him and Buck pulled his sights down a little, intending to shoot below the shoulders and tear out the wolf's heart with the .30-30 slug. He found the point he wanted, and he also spoke softly.

"All right, *amigo!*"

Twin rifles roared. Unexpectedly their reports smashed the stillness of the Arizona desert. Tortilla Joe shot first and Buck heard the wild roar of his rifle, then Buck's own Winchester kicked back against his shoulder. The dog he shot at seemed to rise suddenly as the lead hit him. He went over backwards, threshed once or twice, and died without knowing what had hit him.

Tortilla Joe, though, did not have such good luck. The dog-wolf he aimed at shifted suddenly, and the Mexican shot him in the back, paralyzing his hind legs. He snarled, yipped, tried to run, and then, his hind legs not working, he tried to crawl into the chaparral, front legs desperately digging sand

"That dog get into that thick brush," Buck hollered, "and he might get away! Give him some more lead, Tortilla!"

"I get heem, Buck!"

Both were standing now The heifer, completely winded, stood still despite the roar and the commotion, but the bitch-wolf, terrified, had whirled and was streaking down the sand-wash, heading for open range. Buck shot at her and missed, his rifle-bullet geysering sand in front of her

"I lead her too much," he told himself

For a moment, a *chamiso* bush hid the she-wolf. Buck shot into the brush, hoping to hit her by luck. She came into another clearing, ears back, legs kicking dust. He shot her this time. His bullet took her and dumped her and rolled her over She yipped, kicked, and rolled on, a tangled mass of canine yips and kicking legs

Buck had not seen the rider who evidently had been in the high buckbrush when he and his partner had started shooting. As it was, the wolf rolled almost into the horse, for the rider suddenly rode out of the brush.

Tortilla Joe said, "I got heem! I bust hees head in weeth my bullets!" For the first time he saw the rider, about fifty yards away. "Where the hell that man he comes from? Hees bronc, he buck heem off!"

Buck McKee jacked the spent cartridge

from his rifle barrel, and kicked in a fresh bullet, all the time watching the rider. The horse, terrified by the shooting, frightened by the wolf rolling against his forelegs, had pivoted and reared, and then, all four feet on the sand, had suddenly broken in two. He bucked across the clearing, really hogging his head.

BUCK had to smile. The rider was having a rough time.

"Where he come from?" Tortilla Joe asked again, also grinning.

Buck said, "Outa the high brush. We never seen him when we spotted the wolves —reckon we was too busy looking at them wild dogs. That bitch wolf rolled right into his horse's legs."

"That horse he buck good."

"Too much horse for that cowboy to set," Buck had to admit.

They stood on the rimrock ledge and watched. In one way, it was sort of amusing; the rider had materialized out of nowhere and then had ridden into the path of the rolling and plunging bitch-wolf. Now he was using every bit of horse savvy he knew to stay in the saddle.

Chapwings flapping, he was shamelessly pulling leather, both hands grabbing the wide saddle-horn. Daylight showed between rider and saddle until it looked as if the rider were being thrown, then somehow he got back between horn and cantle again. He had lost his hat. The third jump had sent his big Stetson flying.

"That horse, he can no throw heem," Tortilla Joe chuckled. "When the man ees in the air the horse he come down under heem an' he find the saddle again— Hola, Buckshots, there he ees goin'!"

The Mexican was right. The horse, instead of bucking straight, had suddenly sunfished, and the rider, legs spread wide, went sailing into space, then landed sitting down on the sand. The bronc, suddenly freed of his rider, bucked twice, then stepped on his bridle reins. He dumped himsef tail-over-tincup and lay for a moment on his back, legs flailing. He rolled over and got up and stood still, his lesson learned.

Tortilla Joe laughed, his dark hand pounding his thigh. The rider tried to get up, then sat down again, his back toward them. Buck felt a moment of anxiety. For one thing, this rider was apparently no more than a boy, or so he judged, by the fellow's slender build. And he might be seriously hurt—a broken leg or arm. Buck hurried down the slope, carrying his rifle.

"I go too," Tortilla Joe said.

The heifer, completely forgotten, had moved away from the cut-coulee, and was meandering down the wash, evidently heading for a water-hole to quench her thirst. Buck walked around the dead bitch. The rider still sat on the sand, and he held his head between his hands, sobbing.

Buck grinned. "What you bawling about, you would-be bronc kicker?"

There was no answer. He saw a small figure dressed in tattered levis, a pair of old run-over boots, and a blue chambray shirt covered thin shoulders. Suddenly, fear in him, he knelt beside the rider. He pulled the hands down from the face. For a moment then, he stared, eyes wide open.

For this was not a man. A pretty face, now smeared with sand and tears, looked at him, blue eyes flashing anger. Behind him he heard Tortilla Joe's low grunt of amazement. Then, hat in hand, Buck got to his feet, his face brick-red.

"Holy Smith," he muttered. "A woman!"

She glared at them. Mingled with her tears was an anger that made Buck step back a pace. He stepped on Tortilla Joe's instep and the Mexican cursed in Spanish. But the tall buckaroo had no time for his partner's misfortunes.

"I'm danged sorry, miss," he muttered.

She stabbed a glance at his rifle. She sent another glance at the dead bitch-wolf. Then her cold blue eyes came back to him.

"You—you cheap Circle Nine dog! You saw me riding through the brush and you shot that wolf just to scare my horse. All right, go back to your good-for-nothing boss and tell him you made a horse throw a nester girl!"

Buck said, "Whoa up, miss. I don't understand."

"We no savvy your words," Tortilla Joe said hurriedly.

SHE was so angry she stuttered. Then she studied them and Buck saw the anger leave her eyes, and her mouth lost its hardness. She looked much prettier now, he decided.

"You shot that wolf, didn't you?"

Buck nodded. "Yes, but I didn't see you in the brush. I had eyes only for the wolf, ma'am. I swear by all that's—"

"The word of one of Brad Fremont's two-bit gunhands is no good with me," she said hotly. "You did that on purpose!"

Buck shook his head. "You're wrong there, ma'am." He looked at Tortilla Joe. "Ain't that right, Tortilla?"

"*Si*, ees correct, mees."

Her eyes moved from one to the other. "Did you call him *Tortilla?*" she asked Buck.

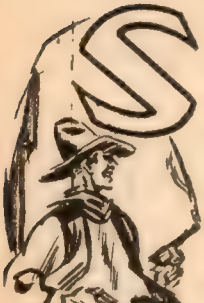
"Yep, I sure did. His name is Tortilla Joe. What makes you ask that?"

"You—you're Buck McKee, then?"

Buck nodded. "That's the handle. But we ain't known in these parts and I don't understand how you come to hear about us. We're just riding through, as it were. We heard a heifer bawling and we slipped up the ridge and saw that wolves was ready to tear her down. We killed all three of them, even the one that stampeded your bronc."

CHAPTER II

Roughshod



SUDDENLY the girl decided to get on her feet. She rose part way upright and then, lips twisted, she grimaced in pain. She would have fallen had not Buck grabbed her arm. Tortilla Joe, not to be outdone in gallantry, was on her other side, holding her other arm.

"Oh, my ankle!"

Buck waited, for her head was down as she fought her pain. Finally, she raised her head.

"It feels better now. I think I can walk."

"We help you," Tortilla Joe said expansively.

"Try to walk," Buck said, smiling at his partner's chivalry.

Tortilla Joe saw the smile, guessed at its cause, and glared at his lanky partner. Between them they got the girl walking and, after about a dozen steps, she said:

"I'm all right. You can let go of me now."

Buck let go of her arm. Tortilla Joe, though, still held her other elbow. "You sure you can walk, mees?"

"You heard her, didn't you?" Buck McKee sported a smile.

Tortilla Joe reluctantly let her loose. The girl walked with a limp, turned and came back, the limp leaving her.

"It isn't my ankle," she said. "It's in the calf of my leg."

"We look at your leg?" Tortilla Joe sounded hopeful.

She became angry again. "You just forget all about my leg," she said stiffly. She glared at her horse. "You old fool plow-horse, Flip! I never knew you could buck that fast!"

The horse, standing with one hip down, merely flicked his ears, apparently amused. He had had his fun and now he rested. Buck paid the animal some attention. He saw a raw-boned, thick-legged horse, plainly a work-horse.

A fresh brand had been burned on the animal's shoulder. It was peeling, which meant the brand was only a month or so old. He pieced two and two together and got four. Evidently the work-horse had been shipped in from the mid-west. There horses were not branded. But out here, because of thieves, every head of stock a man owned, horse or cow or mule, had to pack a brand.

That meant, then that this girl was a farmer's daughter? Or maybe a farmer's wife? Buck stabbed a glance at her left hand. She were no wedding ring. Well, she wouldn't be on the market long, not with her pretty build and face.

She leaned against her horse. She looked at the dead wolf. "You sure are a good shot, McKee. You knocked that wolf rolling and it was running, too. I'm glad to see you two boys."

This mystified Buck. "A while ago you wanted to curse us. Now you welcome us with open arms. How come the change, Miss—"

"Adams. Patricia Adams. Pat to my friends, though."

Tortilla Joe said, "Pat, eh?" He seemed to like the roll of the name on his tongue, for he repeated it twice. Buck didn't like the look in his partner's dark eyes. But his attention went back to the girl.

"How come you recognized our names?" Buck wanted to know.

"Whiskers Watson told us farmers that you two were coming here into Ronde Basin. He told us you were gunmen, and you'd help us fight the Circle Nine."

Buck scowled, swallowed, said, "Whoa up, miss! Is this desolate burned-out hunk of sand called Ronde Basin?"

"This is Ronde Basin. Why?"

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. "Heck, pard, we're in Ronde Basin, and we didn't know it!" He looked back at Pat Adams. "We figured Ronde Basin was to the east across that ridge of mountains. First time we was ever in this section of Arizony. But Whiskers told you wrong. He ain't got no call to label us gunhands. We're just a coupla harmless cowpokes aiming to visit with him a spell in his new home. We didn't come to Ronde Basin to sling guns."

"He said he had sent for you and that he'd get you to help us."

Buck shot once and Rollins dropped his pistol

BUCK scowled still deeper. He and Tortilla Joe had no desire to get into trouble, even for Whiskers Watson, an old friend of theirs. They had been punching cows out of Price, up in Utah, when they had received

the old recluse's letter, asking them to head for Arizona and help him get a start with a cattle spread he was building. Now they were on Ronde Basin range, and trouble evidently rode this sandy cow country on a high horse.

Tortilla Joe dug into his jacket pocket and came out with a *tortilla*, which he unwrapped and sank his teeth into. "Me, I no like thees, Buckshots," he said quietly. "We no want war. We see Wheeskers, no, and then, eef there ees trouble, we heads out quiet, no?"

"Sure, pard."

Pat Adams said angrily, "You two a couple of cowards? You come in to sling guns, then you get scared, so you tuck your coyote tails between your legs and run, eh?"

"But we didn't come to sling guns for farmers," Buck said again.

Buck suddenly remembered the brand on the wolf-cornered young heifer. She had packed a Circle 9 brand on her right ribs. Now he understood why Pat Adams had figured Tortilla Joe and himself for Circle 9 men. They had shot the wolves as the animals had been trying to jerk down a Circle 9 cow.

"There's no middle fence here in Ronde Basin," Pat Adams explained. "You're either for the farmers or you ride for the Circle Nine."

"We ain't for farmers we ain't even seen," Buck said, "and what's more—we ain't for the Circle Nine, either!"

Suddenly a harsh masculine voice cut in. "If you ain't ridin' for the Circle Nine, then get the hell out of Ronde Basin, hombres!"

The voice, savage and dangerous, came from behind them.

Surprised, Buck turned. Tortilla Joe, mouth unhinged, pivoted his fat bulk, moving quickly despite his obesity. Buck heard Pat Adams' gasp, but he had no eyes for the pretty girl—his eyes were riveted on the young man who had come in from behind them.

He was about twenty-two or thereabouts He was almost as tall as Buck, but there similarity ended. Where the face of Buck McKee was grooved by the weather, this bucko had a smooth skin. His eyes, compared with the calm eyes of Buck McKee, were mean and savage, bespeaking a bestial greediness. He wore a fancy buckskin shirt with fringes, California pants, and his chaps were of finest yellow buckskin, trimmed with golden *conchos*. And his boots, highly polished, were bench-made, the spurs handhammered and made of polished silver.

Buck studied the .45 in the dandy's fist. He saw a hand-engraved pistol, the mountings of silver, and he saw a white bone handle. The hand holding the gun was without calluses.

"Who are you?" Buck asked coldly, "and why the hog-killer on us, stranger?"

"I'm Brad Fremont."

Buck felt anger rise. Now who the hell was Brad Fremont? Then he remembered that Pat Adams had mentioned the name. Evidently Brad Fremont, then, owned the Circle 9 outfit!

"Your name means nothing to me." Buck McKee shrugged in open disdain.

A scowl of displeasure marred the man's smooth face. "I own the Circle Nine," Brad Fremont said. "I heard you mention you weren't for the farmers and you weren't for the Circle Nine."

"You heard right."

Fremont smiled, with his lips only; his eyes stayed cold. "I was up on the ridge when you shot those wolves. Your bullets attracted my attention. I want to thank you for the favor."

Buck spoke cynically. "You can keep the change."

Fremont shrugged, apparently amused; his eyes, though, proclaimed otherwise. "There's no room for you two drifters here in Ronde Basin. Like the girl said, there's trouble here, so you two just keep on drifting—unless you want to hire your guns out to my iron."

THE arrogance of the man was salt on the raw for a man of genial Buck McKee's nature. A glance at Tortilla Joe's broad face showed Buck his partner also felt and resented the antagonism and arrogance of this swell-headed cowman.

"Your money is no good to me, Fremont," Buck said coldly.

Tortilla Joe sighed. "Me, I no like your

dineros, either, beeg boss."

This time the cowman's face showed open displeasure. "Then drift out of here pronto, because if I or my men catch you cluttering up Circle Nine range we'll treat you as we treat the nesters! You understand?"

Buck said, "Pouch your gun, Fremont, and say that?"

Fremont smiled—a thin gesture. "I'm no fool. You both would pull against me. You won't work with me, you say, so there's only one other side you can be on, and that's against me."

He backed away, gun covering them. His plan was to get in the thick brush where he would be hidden. He did not know that a man had come behind him. Buck could see this man; so could Tortilla and Pat Adams. Brad Fremont, though, did not hear him, or see him.

Crouched over his Colt, Fremont backed into the man who held a length of *manzanita* wood. The red-colored club came down. It wrapped its wiry length around Brad Fremont's head. Brad Fremont wrapped his length around a nearby boulder.

The man went wild. He screamed and danced an Indian war dance, waving the club. Buck and Tortilla watched in amazement. The man circled Fremont's still body twice, then pranced to a halt in front of them.

Buck stared at him in bewilderment.

Buck McKee had seen queer figures before, but this man was really dressed funny. He wore beaded buckskins that were about two sizes too small for him. His long hair was braided Apache style and he even had a wild-turkey feather stuck into the braid. He wore old moccasins, too.

But it was his face that fascinated Buck. A slim face it was, aged and seamed, apparently older than the body of the man. The teeth were tobacco-colored and even, the lips thin as a dime, and the long nose bent over the man's mouth. The nose separated two dull blue eyes—eyes very dull, very hard to read.

"I'm Iroquois Jones," he said. "Big chief of Nobody Tribe. Me knock out Big Pale Face Big Shot." He gave a piercing Indian yell. Then, in perfect English he said, "I'm the local justice of the peace. I'm in love with Miss Adams. Deeply in love, but my affection, alas, is not returned. I followed her out from town because when I corner her and propose to her she always turns me down. I saw what was happening and I saw that fancy-dressed snake creep up on you, so I outsnaked him and knocked him unconscious. This *manzanita* is a flexible wood and makes a beautiful billy-club. But I think we'd best get out of here before his nibs comes to and starts shooting."

Words gushed out of the man. He seemed to have millions of them ready to gush out like water out of an overturned barrel.

"He never knew what heet heem," Tortilla Joe said, smilingly. "You are the right, Algonquin—"

"Iroquois," the man corrected. "My horse is on yonder ridge. I ride behind your saddle, my love?" Pat Adams nodded. Iroquois Jones looked longingly at Brad Fremont's six shooter which lay in the sand. "Verily, I would like to own that gun, what with its beautiful engraving." He shook his head. "But if he saw me with it he would know who ungraciously slugged him."

Pat Adams mounted. She let one stirrup dangle empty and Iroquois Jones put his moccasin in it and mounted.

"We see you men on yonder ridge." He waved a hand toward a basalt outcropping. "Yonder we meet."

Buck said, "All right."

CHAPTER III

Ronde Basin Range

BUCK McKEE and Tortilla Joe hurried over the sandy hill toward their broncs. And, as they headed through the greasewood, the lanky cowpuncher realized that things had happened fast, and in a short time.

Not more than fifteen minutes had elapsed since they had sneaked over the ridge, rifles

in hand, to kill the three wolves. Now the arrogant owner of the Circle 9 lay on his belly, knocked cold. And what was more, Brad Fremont did not know, nor would he know, who had knocked him cold.

That thought, for some reason, seemed funny. Buck smiled. And Tortilla Joe, puffing along beside him, was quick to notice the amused smile.

"Thees ees not fonny," the Mexican said quickly. "We are een the troubles, an' een deep. The theeng to do ees to head out pronto out of Ronde Basin, Buckshots. Get out while we can."

"I hate to run."

"So do I but— Why you suppose Whiskers Watson he lie about us comin' here as the gunmen, not as veeseetors to his house?"

"You ask too many questions."

"But, Buck, I only ask—"

Buck had deliberately released a wiry catclaw branch and it hit Tortilla Joe across the mouth. Buck grinned and Tortilla Joe said angrily, "You deed that on the purpose. Damn it, some day I—"

"Here's our broncs. Get into saddle and shut your mouth. An accident is an accident. I'd never harm an old pard like you."

Tortilla Joe jabbed his Winchester deep into the saddle-scabbard. "So you say. Wheeskers Watson, he get us eento trouble. These girl, ah, she ees the lovely ones, no?" He jabbed his boot into his stirrup and swung up. "For her I would sweem the Rio Grande—"

But Buck was already loping away. Tortilla Joe, bent over his bronc, swung in behind his partner, with Buck's bronc kicking sand back into the Mexican's wide face. Tortilla Joe dug down deeper, using his spurs and, when they hit a strip of sand free of brush, he drove his mount even with that of Buck McKee. They came to the rough hills, rode into them, and ahead of them were Pat Adams and Iroquois Jones, the justice of the peace mounted on a rangy dun-colored mule.

"Foller me, men!" he called to them.

Buck gritted, "That mule can't run. Get him outa the way or my horse'll run over him!"

The wiry man cakewalked the mule around on its hind legs and his quirt and moccasins drummed the critter's bony ribs. The mule shot out like he had been discharged from a scattergun. Buck was wrong. His bronc could never catch the mule. He had never seen a mule that could run this fast. The dun-colored animal ran like a deer through rocks and buckbrush.

Behind Iroquois came Pat Adams, quirt rising and falling, and Buck came third, with Tortilla Joe behind. They raced across a flat, found the dried bed of a creek, and went down it, four riders pounding sand. And at last Iroquois Jones drew rein under some giant live-oak trees.

He gave out with a savage, high-pierced redskin yell. "Learned that from Geronimo," he told them. "We're glad you two gunmen came in to side us."

Buck corrected hurriedly, "Not gunmen—just visitors with old Whiskers Watson."

"He said gunmen."

"He said wrong," Buck again corrected.

Justice of the Peace Iroquois Jones put his arm around the slender waist of Miss Pat Adams, who moved old Flip out of reach. The justice frowned and he sighed, "Alas, ah love, when one grows old—" Suddenly his voice hardened. "This is a hell of a trick to play on us peaceful farmers, McKee. We look forward to two gunmen and we get a stupid fat Mexican and a lanky stringbean worthless cowpoke—"

His voice suddenly stopped. That was because Buck had both hands around the skinny throat, both thumbs pressing up on the big Adam's apple.

"You take back them words?"

IROQUOIS could not answer. In fact, he had a hard time nodding. Buck grinned and released him, again settling his weight on his stirrups.

"Get this straight, people." Buck spoke concisely. "We came in to see Whiskers Watson and rest for a month or so—a vacation, you might call it. Had we known there was gun trouble here we'd not have come. And it wasn't nice of Whiskers to ballyhoo us up as gunhands, either. When I get my hands on him I'll twist him around till he can look up his spine!"

Iroquois Jones tried to swallow, but his

Adam's apple wouldn't bob up and down correctly. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, men. Whiskers is drinking a lot. He might have made up— Hey, riders coming this way!"

They swept across the sandy wash. Buck counted four of them, and they rode hard despite the heat, headed toward them. When they reined in the cowboy saw that each had a gun in his fist. Dust and sand rose and the wind pushed it away. The raw-boned man who was the leader had a snarling voice.

"You people are riding on Circle Nine range. No nesters wanted here. Time you get off Fremont ground. You seen Brad Fremont?"

Buck studied the man. He saw a big man of about thirty with a hawkish nose, and a cruel mouth with a predatory twist. He packed two guns. Buck looked at the .45 in the man's bony fist.

"I wouldn't know Brad Fremont if I seen him," Buck said quietly. "You gents seem to be itching for trouble. I'm Buck McKee and my pardner here is Tortilla Joe, and we're riding through to get to the other side."

The man studied them, lips curling. "Oh, the two gundogs that old Whiskers Watson sent for, eh? McKee and a Mex. Well, you didn't get far, because we already got guns on you! Whiskers claims you boys are right handy with your hardwares. Me, I don't think so. We rode down on you easy enough!"

The other three men with him smiled. Buck felt the pull of rising anger. He looked at Pat Adams. Her mouth was opened slightly, her face pale. Iroquois Jones chewed tobacco diligently and his seasoned eyes made schemes. Tortilla Joe's dark eyes met Buck's and the Mexican shook his head slightly.

"We want no trouble," Buck said. "We're riding through."

"Good riddance, fellow, and good thinking. Brad Fremont rode this way. You people ain't seen him, eh?"

"We ain't," Iroquois said.

The man turned his hard eyes on the justice of the peace. "Little boy all dolled up in his purty little playsuit, eh?" Without taking his eyes from the justice he spoke

BRAND TALK

FOUR centuries ago, the great Spanish *Conquistadore* Don Hernando Cortes was the first *ranchero* to introduce the cattle brand in North America. Cortes' brand—three Christian crosses—was used on his vast *estancia* in Mexico after his conquest of the natives. Formerly, Don Hernando had burned the letter G (for *guerra*, war) on the cheeks of Aztec captives he sold into slavery; so the idea of branding cattle came readily enough to the ruthless captain from Castile.

Pancho Villa, famed Mexican bandit chief, designed an elaborate Death's Head brand for his huge herd. Pancho, who possessed a diabolical sense of humor, nipped cattle rustling on his range by the simple method of hanging the first two rustlers he caught and leaving their swinging bodies with the tails of stolen steers stuffed into their mouths. Two such object lessons were quite enough—after that, cow thieves left Villa's Death Head brand strictly alone.

Cattleman Burk Burnett's Four Sixes brand enjoyed a curious history. Burk, a notable poker player in a country of poker sharks, won a fine well-stocked ranch on a hand containing four sixes. In due appreciation, the lucky gambler took for his brand his winning hand.

Crafty John Chisum, who at one time ran nearly 100,000 cattle along the Pecos River in New Mexico under his Long Rail and Jingle Bob brands, tried to trap rustlers by using a small concealed brand between the legs of several decoy steers. The first cow thief who put his rope on a decoy promptly found the secret brand, burned a big question mark on the critter and turned it loose. Ol' John never tried *that* trick again!

—*Norman B. Wiltsey*

over his shoulder to one of his men. "Mike, you got a jaw full of fine cut, ain't you?"

Mike grinned and showed tobacco-discolored teeth. "Always pack a jaw full, Rangoon. Which one you want me to take, eh?"

Buck wondered what this was about. Tense underneath, he loafed in saddle, attention of Rangoon's .45. He saw the man's lips take on a satanic grin.

"You take the little boy with the Injun suit on, Mike. I'll take this long jigger that calls hisself McKee."

Mike said, "Sure, Rangoon, let her go."

Deliberately the man called Mike spat tobacco juice into the face of Iroquois Jones. Too late Buck had caught the drift of the conversation. He tried to duck but he was too slow.

Rangoon geysered out a mouthful of tobacco juice. The dirty fluid hit Buck McKee in the face head-on. Tobacco spit splashed down on the cowboy's faded blue shirt and ragged vest.

Anger flooded Buck. He reached for his gun, then discretion overcame anger; logic held him. He took his hand back and put both hands on the fork of his saddle. He did not wipe the tobacco juice from his face.

Iroquois Jones was cursing in a language Buck did not understand. Later on he found out that the language was French. Just now, though, he had no eyes or ears for the justice of the peace.

HIS eyes were on Rangoon.

He asked, "What's your first name, Rangoon?"

Those cold eyes probed him. The thin lips moved. "What's it to you, McKee?"

"I want to know the full name of every man I kill," Buck said quietly. He still had not wiped off the tobacco spit. "I hate to kill a man unless I know his full name."

"Clyde, if that helps you."

"Clyde, eh? Clyde Rangoon. Look good on a headstone."

Rangoon leaned back against his cantle and his laugh was a low snarl. "You and this Mex was just riding through, remember? Don't forget little things like that." He spoke to Mike. "Get up on that sand ridge, Mike. Hold your rifle against these scissor-bills and watch our backs as we ride off. Pronto, cowboy!"

Mike loped away. Soon he was on the ridge, rifle on them. He hollered down, "All set, Rangoon!"

Rangoon looked hard at Iroquois Jones, who had wiped his face clean. There was an amused glint in his eyes as he looked at Buck. But something in Buck McKee's face caused that glint to harden to steel.

"*Adios*, McKee."

"Not *adios*." Buck McKee shook his head. "We'll meet again. You'll find Fremont knocked cold in the brush over beyond that ridge." He lied to protect Iroquois Jones. "I knocked him cold. He didn't even see me throw that club at him. He's purty dumb in my book."

"Your book is wrong. You lying to me?"

"Find out for yourself, you skunk!"

Mike hollered again, "I got 'em covered, Rangoon."

Rangoon gestured with his free hand; his riders spurred away. Then without another word Rangoon also left, his bronc showering Buck's party with sand. Clyde Rangoon rode into the *chamiso*—a tough man in the saddle—and the *chamiso* obligingly hid him.

Buck looked up at the ridge. Sunlight glistened on Mike's rifle. He looked back at Pat Adams. "Who was that Rangoon bucko, honey?"

"*Segundo* for Fremont's Circle Nine, Buck. Understand he's killed about three men, and he has a rep as a gunfighter. But he isn't as tough as Brad Fremont. Don't get a wrong idea about Fremont because of his sissified looks."

Buck wiped his face with his bandanna. "Rangoon and McKee are going to look at each other through the smoke of a forty-five," was all he said.

"Thought you two aimed to ride on," Iroquois Jones said.

Buck shook his head. "We ain't riding on— Eh, Tortilla Joe?"

"We no ride through Ronde Basin, Buck." The Mexican frowned and rubbed his forehead. "That ees a fonny theeng, but them gents they no wear cowboy boots—they were moccasins. You notice that, too?"

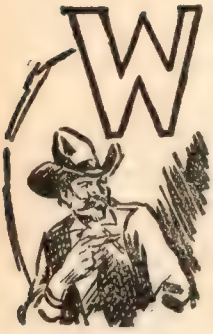
They all had. It didn't make sense. But

Buck had other thoughts. "We'll ride over to Whiskers Watson's camp," he said grimly and, remembering Clyde Rangoon standing on his stirrups and spitting in his face, anger and resentment flushed the cowboy's face.

They loped toward the scarp mountains.

CHAPTER IV

Wild Gun Grass



WHISKERS WATSON had built a one-room cabin out of native rock. When Buck and his companions neared it, the first thing they saw was that the roof had been burned off and caved in onto the rock floor. The cabin's three windows were broken and the window frames burned. Destruction was everywhere.

Buck said, "Somebody sure burned him out, eh?" Fear for the safety of the old recluse hit the tall cowpuncher. "Wonder if they killed him!"

"There's our milk cow!"

Pat Adams pointed toward what had been a barn, evidently a brush *ramada* originally. It also had been burned down. A dead cow lay in the ashes. Two arrows, the shafts burned, were in her ribs.

"Apaches!" Iroquois Jones yelled. "Apaches have hit old Whiskers' outfit, burned it down and killed him!" He waved his hands and hollered, jumping up and down. His braids flapped, the turkey-feathers falling out of them. He looked like an old Apache doing a war dance. "And Geronimo personally promised me us settlers wouldn't be harmed! He went back on his word, the short-necked son of misery!"

"Oh, our cow—dead! The only cow we have!" Pat Adams was almost weeping. "I was out looking for her when I ran into you and Tortilla Joe, Buck. She wandered over to Whiskers' place and the Apaches— Oh, what if old Whiskers is dead?"

Buck said, "We got to look, that's all. Apaches leave their dead lay."

"Cut a circle around the wreckage!" hollered Iroquois Jones. "Look in the brush and look good. My old pal Whiskers, where are you?" He ran into the buckbrush like a frightened rabbit.

Pat went into the *chamiso,* too, leaving Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe alone. Buck made a circle and came back and said, "Lots of moccasin tracks, Tortilla. What do you say, pard?"

"No Apaches, Buck."

"Why say that?"

The Mexican spread his chubby fingers in a gesture of despair. "Apaches no kill cow an' leave her roast. They take cow with them alive; they need grub. There is nothing they could get on this *Dios* forsaken outfit, no?"

Buck saw logic in that. "But moccasin tracks," he pointed out.

Tortilla Joe studied him. "Use what leetle brains Dios geeves you, Buckshots! Brad Fremont, he no like Wheeskers Watson. You see them—hees men—weeth the moccasins on, no? Remember how black the moccasins are from ashes?"

Buck nodded. "Rangoon and his outfit. They torched this place, then cut across country for the home ranch of the Circle Nine. They ran into us by accident. But where is Whiskers?"

"Look out, Buckshots!"

Buck whirled like a top. He was just in time. Something flashed by him—a tawny, long-haired goat, head down, forefeet digging. The goat almost hit the stone wall of the cabin. He swerved in time, then stopped and regarded them with a lowered head, still belligerent.

"Where the hell did he hail from?" Buck asked breathlessly.

"He come hell-bent for the election out of the brush. Just in time do I see heem. You know, he look like Wheeskers Watson, he does! Look at those cheen wheeskers—he look like Wheeskers, sure as shootin'!"

The goat pawed ground, lowered his head again. Buck picked up a rock and heaved at him and it hit him on the back. The goat walked slowly into the brush and disappeared. Buck wiped his sweaty forehead.

"One danged thing after another. Hell of a vacation this is turning out to be. Whiskers

always was crazy about goats. Ain't that the kind of goat a man makes them hairy chaps out of?"

"Angora goat, *si.*" Tortilla Joe turned quickly. "Here he comes again. I hear heem een the brush."

"That ain't a goat. That's a man!"

THE man was a big, husky gent. He carried a rifle under one arm and his other hand was held high in the Apache sign of peace.

Buck growled, "Now who the hell are you, fella?"

He did not get an answer. Pat Adams came out of the brush.

"Oh, Mr. Harding," she said. "What in the name of heaven has happened here, and where is Whiskers Watson and—"

The man she called Harding held up his hand. "Rein in the words, girl. I was on the hill when you folks rode in and I checked to make sure you was friends. Who are these two gents?" The farmer glared at Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe.

Pat introduced them. "They're the two gunmen Whiskers sent for."

"Gunmen, eh? Aiming to fight for us farmers, eh?" Harding had a smile from ear to ear. He shook hands warmly. "Sure need a couple gunslingers to side us."

The word "gunslinger" almost made Buck grimace. Whiskers Watson had surely spread the word far and wide. Then the tall cowpuncher listened to the rest of what the farmer had to say.

Whiskers Watson, he explained, an arrow in his arm, had come staggering into the Harding yard, for the Harding farm was between this farm and the town of Warwhoop.

"Also had a bullet through his leg, folks. Said they had jumped him. He was mumbling about his goat. You seen the critter around? Calls the goat Flophouse."

"We saw him," Buck said. "We ran him into the brush. Where is Whiskers now, and who caused this damage and shot him?"

Whiskers was being taken to Warwhoop, Harding said. The farmer's oldest boy and his wife were taking the old recluse into town in the buggy. Harding had come here to check on the amount of the damage. No, Whiskers had not identified who had shot him or, if he did know, he wouldn't tell.

"Just said he didn't know. Claims somebody slugged him as he come out of the barn, and he remembered guns talking, and when he woke up he was out in the brush. He's bad hurt. Apaches, I'll bet." Harding spat. "That Geronimo is nobody's friend but his own."

"He's my friend," declared Iroquois Jones, who also had come out of the thickets. "And he gave me his word he'd not molest us farmers!"

Harding snorted derisively. "Geronimo ain't your friend!"

"He is so!"

They glared at each other like schoolboys with chips on their shoulders. Buck went to where Pat Adams was looking tearfully at her dead cow.

"Remember them black moccasins on them Circle Nine riders, Pat?"

Moist blue eyes studied him. "Then you figure that Clyde Rangoon and his riders did this?"

"They aimed to blame it on the Apaches. We happened to accidentally meet them, and now their scheme is shot to smithereens."

"Our—our cow—is dead!"

Suddenly she was weeping in his arms. She was feminine, soft, warm; he liked the womanly feel of her. His hand went under her chin and raised her head. Blue eyes trustfully regarded him silently.

He glanced around.

Nobody was watching. Tortilla Joe was listening to the farmer and justice argue. Buck kissed Pat on the lips.

Her mouth was moist: she returned his kiss.

"Buck—"

Buck hid his surprise. She should have evaded his lips; yet she had kissed him, possessively, clingingly.

"Don't worry about your cow. We'll get another."

"Where?"

Buck felt reckless. She pressed her curves against him.

"Brad Fremont has a lot of cows. We'll lay a rope on one, make a milk cow out of her."

(Turn to page 88)

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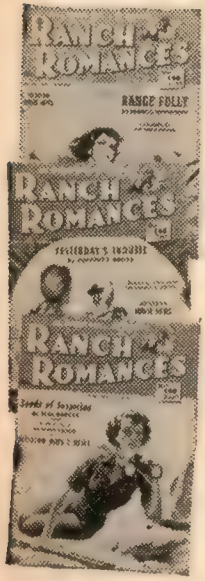

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"But the Circle Nine brand—"

"We'll rebrand her with your iron." Buck was the first to step back. "We'd better go see old Whiskers. Joe and I have been friends of his for over twenty years."

"He wants Flophouse in town."

"He'll get his goat."

HARDING was still arguing with Iroquois Jones. With Pat beside him, Buck returned to the group.

His promise to steal a Fremont cow had evidently cheered the girl. Although this would make him a cow thief, he held no love for Brad Fremont. His mind went to Whiskers Watson.

A nice old gent, but sort of balmy. Always had liked goats. Never had married. Once his niece had come to live with him. He and his current goat had, at that time, made her life miserable. Within a week she had fled.

Buck smiled.

"What's funny?" Pat asked.

"I can just see me and Tortilla Joe leading a goat into Warwhoop." Buck spoke to his partner. "We lay a rope on Flophouse and lead him into town, eh?"

"Wonder if he is halter broke?"

"If he ain't, we'll teach him to lead plumb pronto."

Buck mounted and shook out his *maguey* catchrope. Flophouse watched him, head down. When Buck rode toward the goat the goat suddenly darted into the high brush.

"I can't rope him in that brush, Tortilla. Bend over and pick up a dollar, your back to Flophouse."

"I no see no dollar on the ground."

"Bend over."

Tortilla Joe bent, back toward the goat. Even the justice of the peace and the farmer stopped arguing to watch.

Pat smiled widely, tears forgotten.

Flophouse stared at Tortilla Joe's wide beam. He looked at Buck. Then apparently desire defeated discretion.

Horns down, Flophouse charged, forefeet digging sand. Buck waited, loop ready. Suddenly he grinned. The devil had pinched him. He could easily have roped the charging goat.

Instead, he deliberately missed.

His loop went out, touched dust, and he jerked it quickly, making it miss. Tortilla Joe, glancing backward, saw this. He howled and started to fall flat. His plan was to get down low, so low the goat's horns would not touch him.

He was too slow.

Flophouse hit him. There was dust, and in it a wild mixup of fat Mexican and angry goat.

Pat screeched with laughter.

Harding stared, mouth flapping. Iroquois Jones went into a wild war-dance. His voice was as sharp as a knife. His braids flapping, he pranced and screamed, and Pat kept on laughing.

Hurriedly Buck had snapped back his *hondo*. One hand went out, snagged the rope, and one shake—he had a loop. Flophouse, whiskers bobbing, came out of the dust. Buck's fast loop got him around the neck.

Flophouse, retreating wildly, hit the end of the rope.

Buck was tied hard-and-fast. Flophouse stopped, his head and his tail exchanged places. The goat hit the ground on his back. Then both he and Tortilla Joe were gingerly getting on their feet.

Tortilla Joe's face was red with anger. Pat stopped laughing. Harding's mouth snapped shut. Iroquois Jones halted, still yelling.

"You do that on purpose, Buck?"

"No, I missed—"

"You missed on purpose!"

Tortilla Joe advanced, fists doubled. Buck drew his bronc out of reach. He kept saying it was an accident. Then Flophouse took a hand. Despite the rope, he lunged at Tortilla Joe, who ran.

Again Flophouse hit the rope's end. Again he went tail over tincup.

Anger left the Mexican's eyes and a limpid sorrow entered. "You no mean to miss, Buck?"

"I cross my heart."

"I accepts. We take thees goat into town, no?"

Buck wiped his forehead. "We sure do," he said.

CHAPTER V

Mad Gun Town

THE clerk in the Warwhoop hotel had a claw-hammer. He was so mad he beat on the counter with it, making dents.

"Get that stinking goat out of here!"

Buck said, "Hold your horses, little man." He looked at Tortilla Joe. "Flophouse sure don't like stairs, eh?"

"He no climb the stairs."

They had a rope around Flophouse's neck. They had made a twitch out of it and, although the twitch was tight around the goat's lower jaw, he still would not budge an inch.

He stood in the hotel lobby, forefeet braced against the riser of the first step of the stairway.

"Why they no geeve Whiskers a downstairs room?" Tortilla Joe complained, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Here we fight this goat gettin' heem into town an' now he won't go up the stairs, no?"

The clerk screamed for the town marshal. His screams, coupled with his beating on the counter, had filled the lobby with curious men and women.

"Get that stinking goat outa here!" The clerk's voice missed a key and rose into a squeaking pitch. He started toward them with the hammer raised, but a big man grabbed his arm.

"You want these gents thrown out of here, Greenshade?"

"I sure do, Rollins. Where in hell is the marshal?"

"Out of town for a few days." Rollins eyed Buck McKee appraisingly. He was a big man, this Rollins, and he wore a low-tied gun. "I'll handle this for you."

"But you ain't the law," Greenshade said.

"I work for Fremont's Circle Nine. Warwhoop town belongs to Fremont. These two must be the gents Brad was arguing with when one of them sneaked up and knocked him cold with a club!"

Buck listened, pretending to be busy with Flophouse. Since coming to Warwhoop with Flophouse he had learned that Clyde Rangoon had found his boss still knocked cold on the spot where Iroquois Jones had buffaloed him with the *manzanita* club. Rangoon and his men had taken Brad Fremont to town for medical attention. The Circle 9 crew were now in the Branding Iron Saloon, Buck had heard. Maybe Fremont had sent this Rollins to the hotel to pick trouble.

"Work them over!" Greenshade screamed. "You got my permission."

Rollins moved forward toward Buck and Tortilla Joe. He was crouched, hands down low, and his piggish eyes were glued on Buck. Buck straightened. Tortilla Joe watched, face a frozen brown mask. Flophouse stood belligerently rigid.

Rollins snarled, "You heard what the clerk said, didn't you? Scatter out of here, you two! Savvy?"

Buck studied the man. He saw the coarse bestiality in the heavy face, the wide mouth, the stubborn whisker-covered jaw. He glanced at his partner. Tortilla Joe's brown eyes were riveted on Rollins.

"You the Law?" Buck asked.

Rollins snarled answer. "The clerk don't want you and that stinking he-goat in here, savvy? Get out pronto!"

Buck quickly noticed that the crowd was breaking away like sagehens running in front of a pair of coyotes. Tortilla Joe turned his limpid eyes on his partner and shook his thick jowls in feigned sadness.

"All the time there ees the troubles."

"You keep out of this, Tortilla."

"Sure, I keeps out."

Buck looked back at Rollins. The gunman had stopped a few feet away, jaw almost in Buck's face. Buck retreated two paces; Rollins followed. That put Tortilla Joe a pace behind Rollins.

Buck said, "I don't want no trouble!" He retreated another step.

UNSEEN by Rollins, Tortilla Joe dropped to his hands and knees. He crept behind Rollins. Buck suddenly pushed the

gunhand backward, heel of his hand hitting Rollins' barrel-like chest.

"What the—"

Rollins fell over Tortilla Joe. He landed on his back, the wind knocked out of him. Still on his hands and knees, Tortilla Joe reached out and snagged Rollins' .45.

He threw it out the window. Glass cascaded to the floor. The gun landed with a thud on the sidewalk outside.

"Now you busted the window!" Greenshade's voice hit an even higher note.

Deliberately Buck kicked Rollins in the belly. If the man had any wind at all, Buck's boot drove the last of it out of him. Rollins gasped, tried to sit up. Buck's boot slammed against the Circle 9 man's chest, driving him backward to the floor.

Rollins lay there, still gasping. He did not try to rise for Buck's .45 was behind his right ear.

"You owe us an apology," Buck purred, "and you owe the clerk for the window you busted."

"You busted that window! And Rollins apologizes to no living men!"

Buck cocked his .45. "Brad Fremont sent you over here deliberately to pick trouble. I could shoot you in cold blood without blinking an eye, Rollins!"

A woman gasped, "Will—he—murder him?"

"He'd kill him," a man said.

Buck had no intentions of murdering Rollins. He merely wanted to scare the gunman. His gaze met that of Rollins. The cocksure look in the gunman's gray eyes had changed to a look of terror.

"By Tophet, you *would* murder me!"

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. "Should I kill him here or let him get on his feet?" He dug the barrel of his .45 harder against Rollins' skull.

"Let him stand up, Buck. Then when he heets the floor he will make a noise, no?"

"Get up, Rollins!"

Rollins got to his feet, eyes wild. The clerk stared, mouth open; men and women watched, some terror-stricken. Only Flophouse Watson seemed composed and at ease. He chewed on the twitch, whiskers moving up and down.

Buck said, "There's something wrong with my gun. It won't fire." He lowered the pistol as though to inspect its mechanism.

This gave Rollins the chance he wanted. He whirled, bolted. Buck ran after the gunman. Rollins did not even pick up his .45; he was in too much of a hurry. Buck shot three times, each bullet kicking splinters out of the plank sidewalk behind Rollins' hurrying spurs. Rollins did not look back. He turned into the Branding Iron Saloon, and became lost from view.

Behind Buck, men and women laughed. Tortilla Joe said, "I thought there was sometheen' wrong with your gun, so you said. But it shooted all right an' it work good, I theenk."

Buck smiled. "Had to give him a chance to run, so I made up that excuse. We ought to enter him in the horse-races down at Tucson during the fair this fall."

"He tell Brad Fremont."

"Let him," Buck grunted. "We're in trouble deep now; we couldn't get in no deeper."

He heard a second-story window screech as it reluctantly slid up. He looked up at the window.

At first he had the weird thought that perhaps Flophouse had climbed the stairs, gone into a hotel room, and opened the window to look down on him. Then he realized he was looking at the whiskey face of old Whiskers Watson.

"Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe! As I live and breathe, my two old pards!"

"Gunmen, not pards." Buck was cynical.

Whiskers' chin-whiskers bobbed. "Now, Buckshot, don't get an old man wrong. I knowed I got too much under the influence of alkiehall and when I get lubricated I talk too much. Where's my Flophouse?"

"In the lobby."

AGAIN the whiskers moved. "You can't lead him up a incline. You gotta back him up, Buck. I can't move. I got my bed close to the winder and I'm in bed a-talking down to you. Come on up."

"If we can get the goat up."

"Back him up the stairs. I'll look for you."

Buck and Tortilla Joe entered the hotel.

The onlookers were now interested in Flophouse who was chewing the rope-twitch with dogmatic industry. Buck again sized up the goat, studying him from all angles.

"What will he weigh?" he asked Tortilla Joe.

"Oh, about a hundred pounds, maybe no?"

"I asked you." Buck grabbed the goat by his forelegs and put him on his side. "Get his hind legs and tie him all four feet."

He watched Tortilla Joe make a rapid tie. When the Mexican finished, Flophouse lay tied securely. He had stopped chewing and he looked up at them.

"We'll drag him up the stairs," Buck grunted. "If we pushed him up backwards it would be a terrible chore."

Together they unceremoniously dragged the goat up the stairs. Once in the hall, the going was easier. Flophouse lay on his side and skidded down the hall-runner. The bellowing voice of Whiskers Watson showed them the right room. Flophouse was pulled inside, the door was slammed, and old Whiskers, resting on one elbow, glared at them, then at his bewhiskered friend.

"McKee, dang me if you don't get dumber day by day! That ain't no way to treat a respectable goat."

"A goat," Buck said sourly, "is never respectacle. If you don't believe it, smell my hands." He poked both palms under Whisker Watson's nose. The nose twitched.

"Flophouse needs a bath," Whiskers Watson claimed. "Untie him and let me pet the old bugger."

They untied the goat and pushed him close to Whiskers' bed. The gnarled, work-twisted hands lovingly ran over the goat's thick wool. Flophouse started to chew the end of the blanket.

Buck said, "Well."

Tortilla Joe said, "Talk."

Old Whiskers had tears in his eyes. "I love this old fella," he said. "Of all the goats I've been lucky enough to own this is my favorite." He kept on petting Flophouse who kept on chewing the end of the blanket. "I'm sorry about advertising you two as gunmen, but as I said—"

"You got drunk again," Buck finished.

"Yeah, John Barleycorn."

Watery eyes vacillated between them. Buck could not help but feel pity for the old man. But he kept his voice gruff. "We got into trouble right away with Fremont. Then this Clyde Ragoon button spit in my mug."

"An old habit of his," Whiskers Watson claimed. "He gave me the works once, too. Took me a week to get the tobbacer stain out of my beard. You kill him for it, Buck?"

"Not yet."

"He's a tough one," Whiskers Watson maintained. "So is that Rollins gent what you run off. Have you met Patricia yet?"

Buck admitted they had. And he described the circumstances under which the introduction had been brought about. Whiskers cackled like a hen with a new egg.

"Lovely gal. Even had my arm around her a few times, old as I am. Well, them Apaches sure boogered me up. Burnt my spread down."

"White Apaches," Buck said.

Whiskers peered at him. "How come you make that statement, McKee?"

Buck told about the moccasins worn by Clyde Ragoon and the Circle Nine killers. "They never expected to run into us, or they'd pulled off them moccasins and put on their boots."

"You sure they burnt my outfit?"

TORTILLA JOE shrugged. "They have the black ashes on their moccasins, Wheeskers. Now you tell me this thing, no? How come you turn to farmin'? You used to prospect and look for the gold, remember?"

"Look out the door," Whiskers whispered.

Buck looked up and down the hall. Nobody in sight. He returned back to the bedside of the wounded oldster.

"Nobody out there," he informed. "Now what is behind all this, you profane old rooster? How come you settle out on that rockpile and call it a farm? Only thing you could raise out there on that sandy desert is to raise hell."

"Nobody out there?"

"Nobody is listening," Buck said impatiently.

A clawlike hand dug under the pillow.

It came out with a buckskin bag. Feverishly the gnarled fingers untied the thong. Buck thought maybe the old man had hit gold. Instead, a white-colored mineral tumbled out. It was in the shape of a nugget, though.

Buck said, "Silver?"

"No."

Buck took a nugget to the window to get better light on it. He rolled it between thumb and forefinger. "If it ain't silver, what is it?"

Whiskers Watson's voice was a hoarse croak. "Platinum. I got lots of it, too. Mine behind the house, in that hill!"

"Platinum?" Tortilla Joe scowled. "What she ees platinum?"

Buck said, "Platinum is worth more than gold."

He stepped toward old Whiskers, intending to hand the nugget back to the recluse. That step saved his life.

The bullet, coming from the alley, missed him.

The window broke. Glass smashed to the floor. Buck McKee, gun in hand, ran out the door.

Behind him, he heard Tortilla Joe's holler: "Wait for me, Buckshots!"

Buck McKee hollered back over his shoulder, "You go out on Main Street, Tortilla!"

"*Si*, Buckshots!"

CHAPTER VI

Death in the Dusk

LANKY Buck McKee did not go down the back stairway that led to the alley. This was an ambush range, and the busher might expect him to come down that stairway. A well-placed brace of shots would then down him for good. He had been lucky he had stepped away from that window.

He crossed the hall, jerked open a door, and ran across the room. A woman, half-dressed, screamed, then ran into a clothes closet, holding her dress over her front. Buck got a glimpse of pretty thighs, a dark head of hair, then she was in the closet, the door slamming shut.

"Sorry, madam!"

"Get—get out!"

By this time he had slammed the window upward. He dropped out onto the flat porch of the Mercantile. He ran across this porch, boots hitting the soft tar of the roof, and scaled a wall, landing on another roof. Gun in hand, he hurried forward, ready for trouble.

He wanted to get behind the ambusher, for he figured the man would linger in the alley, hoping he, Buck, would come running down the back stairway. So Buck hurried, and finally he reached the last building. Below him was a drop of about twenty feet. He had to take it.

Knees bent, Buck dropped toward the dust. He hit the ground hard, staggered, then caught his balance. His boots pounded the dried earth as he sprinted toward the back of the building. Breathing hard, he broke into the alley. A man was running toward him, about fifty feet away, glancing back over his shoulder as he ran. Then he turned his head and saw Buck.

Buck thought, "Rollins!"

Rollins stopped, staring at him. His .45 was dangling in his right hand.

Buck said, "You ambusher!" and then, without warning, Rollins went to both knees. And, as he sank down, his six-shooter rose rapidly.

The rapid movement, totally unexpected, caught even the alert Buck slightly off-guard. Rollins shot first, his palm fanning his hammer, but haste was riding him with long spurs, and haste made him spill his bullet wide.

Buck shot once.

Rollins straightened, a grimace on his face, and dropped his pistol. His right hand came up and covered a spot below his ribs on his left side. He looked at Buck, face twisted with pain.

"I shot too—fast."

Buck moved forward, .45 rigid. Eyes on the gunman, he booted Rollins' pistol to

one side. The gun hit the base of a building and made a metallic sound. But Buck McKee had no ears for the ring of metal against the sheet-iron wall. His eyes were on Rollins.

"You tried to ambush me," he said. "How come you try to kill me? Was it because you was mad because I outbraced you in the lobby, or did Brad Fremont hire you to shoot me down?"

"You—made a fool out of me."

Buck said, "I don't think that was it. Part of the cause, of course, but I think Fremont paid you to try to kill me."

"Why would Brad want you out of the way?"

"I'm a friend to Whiskers Watson."

"Brad fights his own battles."

Tortilla Joe came puffing up. "So you get the hombre, eh?"

Behind him came other people and Buck's glance showed that Brad Fremont had arrived. Beside the arrogant owner of the Circle 9 was Clyde Rangoon, still chewing tobacco. Also, Buck was surprised to see Pat Adams, too. He figured she was at her brother's farm. She really got around, that girl did.

Blood seeped through Rollins' fingers. He said, "I—I'm sick," and went down on his face.

A man said to Buck, "I'm Doc DePhillips," and knelt beside the prone gunman. He spoke to Pat Adams. "Give me a hand, Pat?"

BUCK watched Pat go to her knees in the dust. Then he looked at Brad Fremont. Their eyes met, held, and they probed each other.

"You hired him to ambush me, Fremont?"

"What do you mean, ambush?"

Buck said patiently, "Somebody shot at me through the window in old Whiskers' room. I went along the roof tops and came in behind him. There he is." He gestured with his .45 toward Rollins.

"You think I hire somebody to do my dirty work?"

"I wouldn't put it beyond you."

Brad Fremont moved forward, fists doubled. "Mister, for them words—"

Clyde Rangoon pulled him back. Fremont sent a hard look at his segundo.

"I'll handle him for you, Boss." Rangoon showed a twisted, ugly smile. He spoke to Fremont but his eyes were riveted on Buck McKee. "Me and him has met before. Pouch your gun, McKee, and take a beating—the beating of your life!"

Fremont smiled. "Take him apart, Rangoon!"

Buck looked at the Circle 9 owner. "You afraid to fight me, Fremont?"

"To me," Fremont said, "you're just another ignorant cowpuncher, no more, no less. Rangoon is right. I should think of my knuckles."

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe, who was watching Brad Fremont. The Mexican nodded slightly.

The nod told Buck that, if Fremont tried to horn in, Tortilla Joe would attend to him. Buck was free now to give Clyde Rangoon his entire attention. Rangoon had an evil light in his slitted eyes, and a mouthful of tobacco juice. Buck read the man's mind. Rangoon aimed to spit in his face and blind him, then hit him.

Buck had ideas of his own.

He lowered his gun, letting the tip rest in holster, but still his hand around the stock. He moved closer and Rangoon, grinning devilishly, suddenly spat a brown stream of tobacco juice.

Buck ducked it. He came up, gun rising; the barrel came down. Clyde Rangoon, attempting to pull his own .45, stepped back a step—but he was too slow. Buck's .45 smashed down on the man's head directly above the left ear. It skidded down, tearing the ear loose at the top, and Rangoon folded and fell. He plopped into the dust and lay still.

Somebody gasped. It had happened very quickly. Buck pivoted, gun on Brad Fremont, but the Circle 9 owner, caught totally unawares, had not even drawn. Buck's gun covered him.

"You taking a hand, Fremont?"

For the first time Brad Fremont saw the .45 in Tortilla Joe's dark fist. Anger struggled across his face, giving him a satanic

ugliness, and then anger changed to logic, and the inner battle was over.

"Not with two guns on me I aint, McKee. I still think I have a little bit of sense."

"Damn little," Buck gritted. He holstered his .45, the gun barrel twinkling. The pistol slid into oiled leather with a little *swishing* sound. "Put your hogleg away, Tortilla. This gent ain't got no fight right now." He looked at Rollins. "How is he, Doc?"

"Shot through the side. Vital organs might be punctured, might not be. We got to get him to bed."

"Roll him in with Whiskers Watson." Buck was cynical. "They'll make good bed fellows." He turned his attention again to Brad Fremont.

"You ride a tall horse, McKee," Fremont said. "You told Rangoon you threw a club at me and knocked me out. That's a lie!"

"How come you get knocked cold then?"

"Somebody came in behind me. When Rangoon and his men met you—"

Buck cut in, "His *men?* You mean his Apaches, don't you?"

Fremont eyed him with careful scrutiny. "You know too much, McKee. Well, go back to the original talk. When Rangoon met you and your pard Iroquois Jones was riding with you. He's no friend of mine. He was the one that—" He stopped suddenly and walked over to where Rangoon lay.

Iroquois Jones asked, "What were you going to say, Fremont?"

Fremont looked at the oddly dressed justice of the peace. "You go to hell and stay put."

HE HELPED Rangoon to his boots. Then, with the aid of another Circle 9 puncher, he got Rangoon walking, the man's first steps being rubbery as Fremont and the cowhand held Rangoon upright. Consciousness returned to the segundo slowly, then his knees stiffened.

Fremont hustled his man toward the Branding Iron Saloon.

Iroquois Jones gave out a wild warwhoop. "He don't like me," he said. "He's got suspicions." His eyes narrowed in reflective thought. "He acted plumb sure—not like he was working on a assumption—"

Buck said, "He sounded positive."

"I wish Geronimo was here to help me."

Buck smiled at that. Two men came with a canvas stretcher and rolled Rollins on it and carried him away. The doctor went to the Branding Iron Saloon to look at Rangoon's ear. Pat stood beside Buck, looking up at him.

"You're a brave, brave man, Buck." Her hand sneaked into his.

"Not brave," Buck corrected. "More dumb than brave." He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back. They were getting chummy, he realized. "Are you a nurse, Pat?"

"I work with the doctor on cases." She smiled at him. "I got to get Rollins into bed and then Doc is coming back to dress his wound."

She hurried away, but, before leaving she gave Buck a sweet smile.

Rollins had cursed Buck with methodical regularity when they had carried him away. Buck stood there, face grave, and remembered the man's ugly curses. Fate, he realized, had a way of shoving a man around. This morning he had not known Rollins, and now he had put a bullet through the man. Things had sure jammed up in a hell of a hurry. His eyes met those of Tortilla Joe. And Tortilla Joe had sad-looking doggish eyes.

"We, Buck, are in the hell of a spot, no?"

"Could be worse."

"Only if we were the dead mans could it be worse. We cannot ride out of Ronde Basin now, Buckshots. Brad Fremont, he no let us ride out. Hees pride, she ees hurt. Eef we leave he trail us to kill us."

"That's right," Iroquois Jones chimed in.

Buck glowered at him. "Who asked you to put in your oar?"

"But he speaks the truth, Buck. Me, I'm in a mess, too. I'm stayin' close to you boys. I'm no gunman. My only chance to keep alive is to stick around as close as your shadow."

"I'll love that," Buck growled.

Tortilla Joe repeated, "We can't ride out."

"Who wants to?" Buck demanded suddenly. "You think I'm chicken-livered or

something? They tie into me, beat me, try to murder me from ambush—" He caught his temper in time. Tortilla Joe was sporting a wide smile. "You're just funning me, you old hellion!"

They were in front of the hotel. Through the broken window came the whiskery goat-like face of Whiskers Watson.

"Hey, bring up a bale of hay!"

Buck studied Tortilla Joe and the Mexican turned questioning eyes on Buck. Iroquois Jones looked up at Whiskers.

"You eating hay now?" Buck demanded.

"Not me. For Flophouse."

The clerk came out and said, "Don't get him any hay. He intends to keep that goat in his room."

"What's wrong with that?" Buck asked innocently.

"What's wrong with it?" The clerk almost choked. "Why, that goat will stink up the place, drive my customers away—"

Buck looked up at Whiskers. "I'll tote up a bale of hay."

"Try it," the clerk challenged.

"He has the legal right," Iroquois Jones told the clerk.

IROQUOIS and the clerk started to argue about the legality of feeding hay to a goat in a hotel room. Tortilla Joe, fascinated by the high-faluting words passing between the two, listened with a smile.

Buck asked, "Where can I get a bale of hay, Whiskers?"

"Down at the livery barn."

Buck said to Tortilla Joe, "I'll be right back."

He went down the street toward the barn. People glanced at him with curiosity. He got the impression they were curious as to what constituted the makeup of a man ignorant enough to buck Fremont Circle 9.

There was a wide space between the Branding Iron Saloon and the next building. As he passed this space he got a clear view of the alley. One glance was sufficient. He identified both persons.

The woman stood on one leg, the other leg upraised, and her arms were around the man's neck, and she was kissing him long and lovingly. The man was returning the kiss, and Buck saw that his hands, behind the woman's back, were making bold explorations.

He was surprised, and his face showed it.

Then, as he went in front of the store, they were cut off from view. But the scene was clear in his memory.

The girl had been Pat Adams.

And the man she had been kissing had been nobody else but the owner of the Circle 9 spread, Brad Fremont!

CHAPTER VII

Gunsmoke Town

ALTHOUGH the door to the hotel lobby was wide enough to admit the bale of hay, the clerk stood between Buck and the stairway. He held a short billy and waved it menacingly.

"You ain't getting that hay up these stairs, McKee!"

Buck studied him with interest. "What's going to stop me, Greenshade?"

"I—I am!"

Buck had the bale over his shoulder. He slid it to the floor, pretending to be tired. He was tired, too, but not from toting the heavy bale of hay. He was tired of the clerk's yapping.

"You really don't want this hay to reach the goat, eh? Hell, man you want to be responsible for old Flophouse starvin' to death? You wouldn't want to go to your grave with that black mark against your tender soul, would you?"

Again the billy waved in menace. "Don't try to soft-pedal me, McKee."

"You're no piano," Buck told him. He raised the bale off the floor, holding it with both hands around a wire. Then, without warning, he pushed the bale out, and the heavy bundle hit the clerk in the belly. The force pushed him back and he tripped on the first stair and sat down. Buck put the bale on him and sat on the bale. The clerk

kicked, tried to yell; the bale muffled his sounds. Deliberately Buck got out his bandanna and wiped his forehead.

Pat Adams, as lovely as ever, came in the door. "What in the name of— Buck McKee, you got Greenshade under that bale of hay?"

Buck stood up. "Oh, yeah, I forgot." He reached down and got Greenshade's billy and handed it to Pat. "He's too young for such wicked-looking playthings. Well, I got to get this hay up the stairs."

The heavy bale on one shoulder, Buck climbed the stairs. Behind him Greenshade brushed wisps of hay from his clothes and mumbled curse words. Pat Adams, smiling and tittering, was helping him brush. Buck turned the corner, went down the hall, and stopped in front of Whiskers Watson's room.

"Open up, and hurry."

The door across the hall opened. A pretty young woman, her face a trifle too hard, looked out.

"Oh, it's you! I thought—"

Buck grinned. He remembered running across her room and how she had headed for the closet, holding something over her front. "You thought it was somebody else, eh? Well, won't I do?"

"Definitely not!"

"You sure got purty thighs."

She slammed the door hard.

Buck hollered, "Save the hinges, lady."

Iroquois Jones opened the door of Whiskers' room. "You getting so loco you're talking to yourself, McKee?"

"I'm that loco."

They slid the bale of hay into the room. Flophouse was standing on a canvas tarp and was tied to the bed-post beside old Whiskers Watson's whiskery head. When he saw the hay he stopped chewing the end of the blanket.

"He's a problem in sanitation," Iroquois Jones said. "But we'll leave that to Whiskers and the clerk. How is the clerk?"

"Just fine. Gets more congenial all the time."

Flophouse tied into the hay. Whiskers watched his pet eat, and the old prospector's face was wide with a smile. He looked like a mother watching her baby use a spoon for the first time. Buck decided he should have been angry with the old gent but he was not. Iroquois Jones juggled the big .45 tied to his skinny thigh.

"I'm armed, and ready for trouble."

"You know how to shoot that gun?"

"I can hit the inside of a barn if the doors are closed, McKee. Well, I'm sauntering down to my office. Your friend Rollins is down the hall in a room. The doc took him there."

"I'd love to visit him," Buck said with irony. "My little playmate with dynamite caps."

THE clerk entered. For once he was silent. Arms akimbo, he looked at Flophouse, noticing the goat was standing on the canvas tarp. This seemed to brighten his dreary life for he almost smiled. He looked at Whiskers Watson who watched him carefully. Neither man spoke. Then the clerk looked at Buck McKee.

"I only hope, McKee, that Fremont kills you."

"Thanks."

The clerk turned and left, slamming the door. Buck said, "These people seem to have a grudge against hinges."

"Nice lad," Iroquois Jones said. "When he sleeps, which is seldom." He consulted a huge watch. "Time I open my office." He left, the feather in his hair bobbing with each step.

Buck spoke to Tortilla Joe. "Anybody outside listening?"

The Mexican checked, then closed the door. "The hall she ees empty."

Buck pulled up a chair beside Whiskers Watson's bed. Despite the smell of Flophouse, the cowboy stayed close to the recluse. "I got some questions to fire at you, Whiskers."

"Shoot, Buck."

"This girl—Pat Adams?"

Faded blue eyes searched his face. "What about her?" But he answered Buck's questions. "No, she ain't married. She lives with her brother—a few years older than her—got a farm. Why ask such questions? You got your eye on her?"

"I got my eyes on every purty woman. All right, that's settled. What about her brother? What kind of a gink is he?"

Somebody knocked on the door. Buck was sort of surprised for he had heard nobody come down the hall and boots usually made a noise—even shoes. Tortilla Joe, gun out, opened the door.

A man of about twenty-five, clean-shaven and well-dressed in a blue suit, stood there, holding a fine-creased cream-colored Stetson hat.

"May I come in, gentlemen?"

"Sure," Whiskers Watson said heartily. "Buck and Tortilla Joe, meet my neighbor on the range—Ned Adams."

Ned Adams had a hearty handshake. Buck noticed that no calluses were on his hands. And a farmer walked down a furrow hanging onto the handles of an unruly, lurching plow. This man, he decided, was too smooth, too slick, too citified to be a farmer.

"I'm Pat's brother," Ned Adams said. "She told about meeting you two. She came home, all excited, told about us losing our cow. Then she headed into town. I rode over to check on your spread, Whiskers."

"A total loss, Buck tells me?" Old Whiskers Watson was almost weeping.

"A total loss. But don't worry, Whiskers. Us farmers have got to stick together. We'll build your spread up again."

Whiskers Watson wiped his eyes. "That's mighty fine of you, Ned, but my two pards here—my bosom friends, McKee and Tortilla Joe—aim to rebuild for me. They just said so. Didn't you, Buck?"

"I don't remember saying that."

Old Whiskers' jaw gaped. "McKee, you practical joker!"

Ned Adams turned his attention to Buck and Tortilla Joe. "That sure is nice of you two. You have had a rough time since coming to Ronde Basin, I understand, but remember us farmers—all six of us—are with you against the Circle Nine. Any aid we can give we'll be glad to."

Buck could say nothing. Whether he and Tortilla Joe liked it or not, they were momentarily sinking deeper and deeper into the mire-hole of trouble. Brad Fremont was out to get them.

"Nice to have you on our side," Buck said.

"My sister," said Ned, "hates the Circle Nine. She wanted to get a rifle and kill Brad Fremont, after she told me about Rangoon and his murderers killing off our only milk cow."

Buck nodded, remembering a scene in an alley.

Whiskers chuckled. "She's got a temper, that gal has. Well, with Buck and Tortilla Joe here, with me on my feet soon, we got this thing just about whupped, eh, Ned?"

"We got lots of work ahead," Adams said, shaking his head. "Well, good day, men. If I can do anything to help you just call on Ned Adams." He shook hands again and left.

OLD WHISKERS tittered as he stroked one of Flophouse's horns. "That Ned sure is a nice young button. He's Pat's brother."

"He told us that," Buck replied. "He walks on quiet feet, too. I never heard him in the hall until he knocked."

"He wear the rubber-soled shoes," Tortilla Joe said.

Buck returned his attention, and his questions, back toward old Whiskers Watson. How come he, a prospector, to hook up with farmers? Whiskers' grin widened. He was not hooked up with the farmers, he assured. He only made a pretense of being a farmer. This pretense made it necessary for him to work with them against Fremont's Circle 9.

"Do any of these farmers know about your platinum strike?" Buck wanted to know.

Watson's whiskery head shook in hurried negation. None of the farmers knew about the strike. They did not have platinum on their homesteads. They had taken up land down on the desert and had only one hope of making a living off their land—to dam Salt Creek and divert its waters for irrigation. They were working on the dam now.

Buck nodded absently, his lack of interest being a sham. Actually he was listening to every word the recluse had to say. There was something missing here and he wondered what it was. Actually he knew only one thing for sure—Pat Adams played the field,

and seemed to enjoy doing so. Yes, and Fremont was out to kill him and Tortilla Joe, and from now on the owner of the Circle 9 would pull no punches.

"Did you ever tell anybody about your platinum strike?" he asked the old man again.

"Only you and Tortilla Joe."

"Anybody else?"

Whiskers Watson hesitated, forehead pulled down. Then he said slowly, "Never told nobody but you two. Why?"

"You say you're the only farmer who has been troubled by Fremont. Why would he pick on you up there on that rock pile of yours when he knows you couldn't get water up that high, even if the irrigation project pans out?"

"I never thought of that before, Buck."

"Seems odd to me," Buck said.

"Now that you mention it, it does seem funny. Maybe it's because one time I got soused and I slung a gabboon at Fremont in the Branding Iron. He ducked, but he got tobacco juice and cigar butts all over him. He might not have liked for me to do that to him, eh?" The old man tittered like a tickled schoolgirl.

Buck had to smile. "You might be right."

Tortilla Joe bit into a cold *tortilla*. "We are like the *politicos*. We talks *mucho* but we say nothings." He ground industriously with his white teeth into the hard Mexican food. "What we do the next, Buckshots?"

Buck had another question. "You mentioned once you had your arm around Pat Adams, Whiskers. Did you mean that?"

Old eyes studied him. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Only how chummy did you get with the girl?"

"Why do you ask?"

Buck said, "Tell me, or we ride out and leave you at the mercy of Fremont and his killers!"

"Would you do that to me?"

"With pleasure."

Whiskers Watson swallowed hard. "Well," he said hesitantly, "we was kinda engaged at one time. She said she loved me. She still sneaks her arm around me and I —" he blushed— "I—kiss her."

"Did you ever confide much in her?"

"Confide? What does that mean? You mean, did I tell her anything, eh? Well, I never told her nothing." Whiskers turned his attention to Flophouse who was chewing hay with rhythmic diligence. "Sure is a nice goat, eh?"

TO HIM the subject was closed and Buck, knowing him well, knew how stubborn the old man could get. He shrugged and looked at Tortilla Joe whose dark Mexican face was blank.

"You talk like the loco mans, Buck," Joe commented.

"Maybe I *am* crazy. If I stay around here any longer I'll get worse."

A man came down the hall and entered. Buck lowered his gun when he saw it was Iroquois Jones.

"Now what do you want, you half-naked make-believe Geronimo?"

Iroquois Jones had an urgent message. Taking the law in his own hands, Brad Fremont had appointed Clyde Rangoon a deputy sheriff.

Buck studied the justice of the peace. "He *appointed* him deputy? Why, hell, man, only the sheriff appoints deputies. Is Brad Fremont sheriff, too?"

"He took the law in his own hands, Buck. Said he was the biggest taxpayer around here and we needed a deputy, so he appointed Rangoon. And what's more, the sheriff at the county seat will back him up. That weak-livered sheriff knows who butters his hot cakes, and if it came to a good legal showdown, the county attorney would side the sheriff and Brad Fremont."

"This won't come to a legal showdown," Whiskers Watson chimed.

"Why the sudden need for a deputy?" Buck asked.

"Maybe he wants Rangoon to pinch you and Tortilla Joe," Iroquois Jones said. "But if he gets you into my court I'll acquit— Say, he appointed a new justice of the peace, too. I forgot."

"He—what?" Whiskers Watson's voice was a gasp. "You—you ain't it no longer, Iroquois?"

"We got two of 'em, I guess. Martin Ramskill was appointed by Fremont. Fre-

mont aims to pinch Buck and Tortilla Joe and try them before Ramskill. He's a powerful man."

"Only one bullet needed," Buck said.

Iroquois Jones gave out with a war-whoop. "We'll win, though." He went outside, then stuck in his ungainly head again. "Gal out here wants to talk to you, McKee. Alone, she says."

Buck went out into the hall where he met Pat Adams.

"Buck," she said, "Rollins—he wants to talk to you. I think—he's got something important." Her eyes roved over his face. "Why, Buck! How nice!"

For Buck had his arms around her. He pulled her close against him. Her curvesome body fitted against him correctly. Her eyes, wide and pleased, studied him calmly.

"Buck—"

"Pat—"

CHAPTER VIII

Greasewood Guns

PAT ADAMS wore a loose-fitting blouse. Buck's hands sneaked under it and rested on her bare skin. She had a nice backbone. Her skin was soft; her back was warm.

Buck kissed her long and slowly.

"Buck—" she whispered. "Gosh, this is sudden, Buck. We've known each other only a few hours, and here we—"

She kissed him. And all the time she applied pressure at the right points. Finally she stepped back.

"What did you say about Rollins?" Buck asked.

"He wants to talk to you—alone. I'll step into Whiskers' room and leave you with him."

"I'll see you again?"

"You'll see a lot of me!" She ducked into Whiskers Watson's room.

Behind her she left an aroma of perfume and a tall cowpuncher who stood there and remembered her moist warm lips, her tight embrace. Then Buck McKee grinned. He looked like a man who had come upon a sudden and great discovery.

He went to Rollins' room.

He opened the door without knocking.

The moment the door opened, the ambusher shot at Rollins. The ambusher was out on the next roof. Buck naturally thought, at first, that the ambusher had shot at him. He saw the window-glass break, heard it hit the floor.

The fellow was a good shot. His bullet hit Rollins in the head. Rollins tried to sit up, then fell back. He was dead before he hit the pillow.

Gun palmed, Buck glanced out the window, saw only the tarred expanse of the nearby roof.

Why had an ambusher murdered Rollins?

Buck pulled back against the wall, out of the rifleman's sight. He gave this predicament a hurried thought. The whole thing tied in, completely and concisely. He remembered what Iroquois Jones had said. Rangoon was a deputy. And Fremont now had a justice of the peace of his own choosing. Fremont had deliberately staged this murder to make it look as if Buck McKee had murdered Rollins.

Besides pinning the deadwood on Buck, Fremont had also got rid of Rollins. Rollins, by muffing the attempted ambush in the hotel room, had incurred Fremont's anger; now one of Fremont's men—or even Fremont himself maybe—had murdered Rollins. And Buck had not caught a glimpse of the distant rifleman.

Boots sounded outside, running down the hall. And Buck heard Brad Fremont's voice shouting:

"That shooting was in Rollins' room! McKee has sneaked in there and killed him, I'll bet!"

Buck had not heard boots come up the stairway from the lobby. That meant, then, that Fremont and his men had been secreted in a hotel room, waiting for the shot. Now they were storming toward Rollins' room.

Buck thought, "A frameup, and I'm trapped."

The boots came closer, a mad cacophony of sound. Soon the door would be jerked open and Circle 9 men would rush in, bristling with naked guns. They would shoot Buck McKee down like killing a rat.

He had only one way out—through the window. Logic told him that Fremont would have the neighboring roofs spiked with his gunmen, but Buck had to take the chance. His pistol barrel smashed into the jagged edges of glass left by the rifle bullet's passage.

He jumped out of the window. As he fell to the roof, a rifle talked; he heard the sing of a bullet. Then it roared into the hotel wall.

Then he was on his feet, running across the tarred expanse of the roof.

Ahead, a rifle cracked.

Buck heard the high whine of the bullet. The rifleman, to make his shot, had risen slightly from his hiding-place.

TOO late he ducked. Buck shot on the run. He heard the man scream—a wild, terrible sound. The rifleman staggered upright, stumbled, and toppled off the building, to land in the alley.

Another bullet, coming from the hotel window, hammered into the roof at Buck's boots. Behind him, Circle 9 men were firing at him.

He had to leave the roof— pronto!

Bending low, he jumped. He landed on his feet in the alley. The rifleman lay on his belly, arms wide. His rifle, broken at the stock, lay beside him.

Panting, Buck rolled him over.

The ugly face belonged to one of Fremont's Circle 9 gunmen. This man had ruthlessly murdered Rollins. Human life, then, meant nothing to Fremont.

And what about Pat Adams?

That thought, roaring out of nowhere, demanded recognition and an answer. And Buck McKee, legging it down the alley, gave it swift consideration. He could not get the right answer.

Had Pat lured him into the death trap set by Fremont? Was she working hand-in-glove with the handsome owner of the Circle 9?

Or had she unconsciously pulled him, Buck McKee, into the trap? Was Fremont using her as an innocent foil?

Buck thought, "I'll give her the benefit of the doubt."

He almost ran into her.

For she had suddenly darted out from between two buildings. Her face strained, her words coming in gasps, she grabbed his arms.

"Buck— What in the name of heaven happened?"

"I walked into a gun trap!"

"You mean Fremont—"

"Just what you're thinking, girl! Fremont and his men were hid in some hotel rooms. A rifleman shot from outside and killed Rollins. I got the man who handled the rifle, though."

Big eyes searched his face. "Buck, I had nothing to do with it! You've got to believe me, Buck! I didn't know I was leading you into a trap!"

"I believe you."

She threw her arms about him. Buck kissed her lips. She was crying. She was either innocent, or a whale of a good actress.

"I got to make tracks," he said hurriedly.

"Where are you going?"

"They're too many to fight—odds too big. I'm heading for the Circle Nine."

"The Circle Nine?"

"Fremont won't look for me in his own home yard. I'm going to get my bronc out of the livery— So long, honey."

"Buck, kiss me."

Hurriedly Buck kissed her.

"Good luck, Buck."

Pistol in hand, he ran toward the livery barn, leaving her behind him. He thought, "She's the unknown thing in this game of pistol pool." He had deliberately lied to her.

Where was Tortilla Joe?

That question was soon answered. When he darted into the dark interior of the livery barn, Tortilla Joe was already saddling his own bronc. And the hostler lay on his back in the stall aisle, knocked cold.

"I hear guns roar, Buck. I say to Tortilla Joe, 'They try to keel my frien', Buckshots McKees.' I hear them holler you get away so I hurry down here, come down

Main Street which is shorter—"

"What happened to the hostler?"

"He work for Fremont, I guess. Anyway he tries to stop me. My gon she is fall on hees head!"

Buck tied his latigo knot. "Must've fell from quite a distance." He snagged his oxbow stirrup. "This way, cowboy! Out the back door!"

WITH Buck in the lead, they rode down the alley. Warwhoop was alive with noise—barking dogs, yelling kids, and shouting oldsters. They spurred down the alley, and they were on the edge of the prairie when, from behind, came the sudden roar of pistols.

The distance, though, was too far; lead fell short. Then, without warning, a rifle bullet whistled. Tortilla Joe unconsciously ducked.

"We gotta get in a coulee," Buck barked. "That lobo with the rifle—"

They almost ran over a jackrabbit which scurried away, ears back, legs kicking sand. They came to a dry-wash. They loped down this, broncs' hoofs muffled by sand, and the rifleman could not see them because of the gathering darkness and the screen made by high *chamiso* and *saguaro* and greasewood.

"Where we go, Buckshots? We make a run out of this country, no?"

Buck drew in his tired horse. The brief respite in the livery barn had not rested his bronc much.

"Want to run like that jackrabbit, Tortilla?"

"No, I no wanna run. What you say, Buckshots?"

Buck spat. "Fremont has dealt us trouble ever since we hit the basin, Tortilla. I aim to deal him a little hell before we leave. Fremont tried to kill me when he set that gun trap back at the hotel."

"What did happen? Me, I hear the gons, then they holler you get away—" The Mexican shrugged his wide shoulders. "You tell me!"

Buck told him. Tortilla Joe's large dark eyes became pensive pools of brown liquid. "That girl—she ees een the game with Senor Fremont, no?"

Buck told about Fremont kissing Pat. "I know she is. But why?"

"Even I kees her," Tortilla Joe supplied, grinning widely. "She come up to me and *bongo* she ees in my arms and we kees."

Buck grinned. "Where was this?"

"Twice she ees happen. Once in the sagebrush an' then at the hotel. She ees kees everybodys, no?"

"Yes!"

Tortilla Joe grabbed Buck McKee's forearm. "Riders they ees come. But we hide here in the brush and they no see us. Pat, she knows about the platinum, no?" His fingers twisted Buck's sleeve. "Old Wheeskers Watson, he tell her. When you ask him he blush."

Buck nodded. "I saw him blush. He must have told her and he won't admit it. And she has told Fremont." He paused, head canted. Somewhere riders drummed hoofs against the parched Arizona earth. "Or is she just working Fremont for her own end?"

"She has the brother, remember?"

Buck murmured, "I wonder." He turned his bronc. "We ride on to that butte ahead, and we look around to see where Fremont leads his men."

"He can no track us, for the evenin' ees too dark. Where would he lead his men, Buckshots, but to the cabin of old Wheeskers. Surely he figure we go there, or else leave the country."

"He might head for his home ranch," Buck suggested.

The stout Mexican scowled fiercely. "But surely he is not loco. Why would he ride for his own Circle Nine *rancho*?"

"I told Pat we were heading out that way."

Tortilla Joe spat amply. "Oh, you test her that way, no? That ees the good test, Buckshots. Well, here we are een the rocks and there they are headin' across the sagebrush an' greasewoods." He pointed at the riders below them on the expanse of the desert.

Buck said. "They're heading for the Circle Nine. She is crooked, the good-looking young heifer. I wonder if she is as pure as she puts on?"

And to this question Tortilla Joe, for once, had no answer.

THEY sat their blowing broncs in a dark mass of boulders that hid them. They watched the Circle 9 men fan out, heading toward the home ranch. They were black ants scurrying across the limitless scope of the desert. Gradually they pulled into the distance and became lost.

Buck rode down the slope, Tortilla Joe's bronc slipping in shale. They reached the sand-packed floor of the desert and only then did Joe voice the thoughts that were troubling him.

"Maybe they sneak back an' keel ol' Wheeskers, no?"

Buck said, slowly, "I've thought of that. But he's armed and the old devil is alert. We got to take that chance. Still, there's another thing, too, that might keep Fremont from murdering him in bed, just like his rifleman killed Rollins."

"What she ees that thing, Buckshots?"

"Tht farmers are all behind Whiskers. If Fremont killed him for his mine this country would break open with bloody warfare that would make the Tonto Basin War seem like a Fourth of July celebration."

"He might keel him, though."

"Only as the last extreme—or so it looks to me. Well, we'd better shake our hoofs, *muchacho!*"

Buck spurred his bronc into a lope. Tortilla Joe whipped his horse close, the wind pushing back his wide-brimmed Mexican hat. Wind pushed against his dark face, giving him a satanic appearance.

"Where we go to, Buckshots?"

Buck smiled. He found delight in deviling his companion. "Ride with me and find out," he challenged.

"Ah, you go to hell, Buckshots!"

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CHAPTER IX

Rifles Ride the Range

IN AN hour Buck and Tortilla Joe were dismounting in the high *chamiso*. Here, laboriously, adze and ax had cleared an acre of the desert. In the middle of this acre was a frame house, unpainted and dark.

"Thus house she belong to Pat Adams and her brother, no?" asked Tortilla Joe.

"This is their homestead." Buck stood and carefully scrutinized the property. "No light, so nobody is home." A dog started to bark. "Only the dog, I reckon, and he looks like he's a pup."

"What we do here, Buckshots?"

"You'll find out."

Buck crossed the clearing, with his partner following him. The pup came out barking wildly but, instead of resisting them, he leaped on them, tail wagging in canine welcome. Buck rubbed the pup's long nose and petted him. The lonesome animal, happy because of this attention, ran in a wide circle, then returned to them. Tortilla Joe tried the door.

"She ees locked, Buckshots."

"You didn't expect it to be unlocked, did you? Let's try the windows."

The windows, too, were latched down.

"How we get in and when we get in what we do?" asked Joe.

Buck lifted his .45. The heavy gun came down and glass shattered with a loud bang.

"Folks are crazy," he muttered. "They buy expensive locks, latch down windows, and if somebody wants in all they have to do is break a four-bit pane of glass." He reached inside, snapped the latch, and lifted the window. "I'll go in here. Then I'll unlock the door for you to get in."

"Me, I can get in through the window."

Buck cynically studied his partner's rotundity. "I doubt that. I'll let you in through the door. He crawled inside a room

that evidently was a bedroom, one of the three rooms in the shack of combination kitchen-living room and two bedrooms. Behind him, puffing like a winded bull, came Tortilla Joe, strenuously climbing through the window.

Inside the room, Tortilla Joe sniffed. "Me, I smells the perfume, no?"

"Smells like skunk oil to me." Buck boldly lit a lamp. "We'll search the spread inch by inch if we have to."

"What if somebody he see the lamplight and ride over to see?"

"We got to take that chance. The pup will warn us."

They went into the living room. A table, some chairs, a couch and a cookstove. And another lamp.

"Light that lamp," instructed Buck, "and turn that room upside down. If you find anything printed or in writing, holler for me. Savvy?"

"Me, I do not understand, Buckshots."

Buck smiled thinly. "Maybe we're on the wrong track, maybe we ain't. Now get to work and work fast."

"I go."

Buck took one bedroom. He went through the drawers in the bureau, he looked under the rug, and he even got under the bed and looked under the mattress. He found nothing.

"Buck, you come here, *pronto!*"

Buck hurried into the living room. Tortilla Joe had climbed up into the attic. He had a small box. In it were some letters and a family Bible. Buck studied the Bible carefully, for it carried a family history of marriages and deaths. He looked at a few letters, but they told him nothing.

"What ees that thing?"

"A diploma, it says." Buck unrolled the diploma and read the writing on it. Then he rerolled it and retied it with the ribbon. "Well, we found out what we wanted to know, Tortilla Joe. Pat is crooked, and is traveling under false colors. She's a no good doublecrossin', chiseling woman who—"

A harsh voice, coming from behind them, halted Buck's accusation.

"You'll eat those words, McKee!"

LAMPLIGHT glistened on a mirror. In the mirror Buck could see a rifle. His traveled up the blue-steel barrel, saw capable looking hands, then he looked into the eyes of the rifleman.

Only it wasn't a rifleman. A rifle*woman*.

Tortilla Joe, also gazing into the mirror, was the first to speak. "Pat Adams," he said, voice hollow. "An' her rifle, too."

Buck growled, "I got eyes."

"But your ears," Pat Adams said, "are bad, McKee. You trusted the pup to bark, I suppose. Well, he knew me too well, and he didn't bark."

Buck turned, hands shoulder high. Beside him big Tortilla Joe turned heavily, also. Buck studied the girl's face.

Lamplight showed lines of cruelty. Gone now was the veneer of meekness, the appearance of feminine softness. Her eyes glistened, her mouth was a curved slash, her jaw was set.

"I outfoxed you, McKee. When you told me you aimed to head for the Circle Nine, I got to thinking you were lying. Now what have you two found out?"

"Just what we looked for, Miss Adams."

"Old Whiskers Watson is a fool. Any woman could handle the old idiot. Even before he told me about that platinum, though, I knew about it. I could have waited and got it without trouble, too. He's that much of a fool."

"How do you mean?"

"You figure that out!" Pat clipped her words. "You two aren't riding out of here alive. I've got a fortune in my hands, I've got that sap of a Fremont eating out of the same hands, and you two aren't going to stop me!"

Tortilla Joe gulped. "You mean—you shoots us?"

"You think fast." Her voice held an edge of hysterical madness. "I'm not going to be poor all my life! Nor am I going to spend my days in poverty on a damned old homestead! You two are all that stand between me and what I want. And you're not leaving this room alive!"

Tortilla Joe, lower jaw wobbling, glanced at his partner. And what he read in Buck McKee's face evidently did not cheer him.

For when he looked back at Pat Adams' rifle his jaw kept wobbling.

"You're not dead yet," Buck murmured, but his voice was also unsteady. A rifle was bad in the hands of a ruthless man. But it was much more dangerous in the hands of a greedy and hysterical woman.

A moment of hanging silence. Outside, the pup scratched on the door and Buck McKee, clinging to any straw, hoped that the woman would turn and perhaps snap an order calling the dog to lie down. But Pat Adams did not turn. She eyed them steadily, rifle raised.

Buck felt cold sweat on his forehead. He had been in trouble before, but this beat anything he had ever encountered. This woman was a fanatic—greed and more greed motivated her. He searched for a way out, mind flicking back and forth, but he found no way.

Pat Adams cocked the hammer on the .30-30. She raised the rifle still more slowly, letting it reach her shoulder. Buck thought, "This is it," and he made his play. A wild, desperate play sired by urgency.

He grabbed a chair, threw it at the woman.

Things happened fast then. A bullet hit him in the left forearm as he swung the chair. He heard the snarl of the rifle, the sound pushing against the walls in exaggerated volume. He saw Tortilla Joe lunge forward, moving quickly despite his bulk. And then the chair crashed Pat Adams' rifle barrel.

Her next shot slapped the softwood floor. She tried to duck, but the diving bulk of Tortilla Joe hit her with heavy force. The Mexican's lunge drove her against the wall. She shot again, but this shot went into the ceiling, for now Buck McKee, blood dripping from his arm, had both hands on the rifle, pointing it upward.

"Tortilla, help me! My arm—it's no good!"

THE woman must have bitten her lip, because Buck saw blood there. Otherwise her face was bloodless, her eyes wide, as she fought like a cougar. Tortilla Joe finally wrestled the rifle from her, but he had a job. She turned to run, but Buck's boot went out and dumped her. And Tortilla Joe, falling as he lunged, was sitting on her. And she was pounding his fat carcass with doubled fists.

"You no hurt me with hits," the Mexican puffed. "Me, I have the fat like the cushion —Buck, you hurt, no?"

"You sit on her. I'll look at my arm."

"I tie her. You throw me the tablecloth, no?"

Buck ripped off a corner of the white tablecloth. He threw the rest of it to Tortilla Joe who tore it into strips. Even though his weight was enormous on Pat Adams she offered no resistance. Her eyes had a glassy, hellish stare, and her teeth, white and even, were clamped on her lower lip.

Buck kicked her rifle into the corner. Then, back to the door, he rolled up his bloody sleeve.

Tortilla Joe said, "You stand up, senorita, no?"

"You two will die for this! Brad Fremont will kill you two!"

Buck watched her. "I saw you in the alley when you were kissing Fremont. That's what put me wise. You've had a lot of practice kissing the boys, Pat. But this is one time your kisses do no good for you."

"This isn't over yet!"

"For you it is. There's a nice cell waiting for you in the Warwhoop juzgado. You're a nice little playfellow, honey. Especially nice when you have Fremont set a murder-trap for a gent named Buck McKee. What will Ned say when he finds out you been spooning with Fremont?"

"He knows."

Buck watched Tortilla Joe tie her hands behind her. She was defiant, eyes metallic, face hard. When the Mexican had finished Buck said, "Put her in a chair and tie somethings around this arm of mine!"

The bullet had torn through the flesh on his forearm. It had ripped a hole, then gone on its way. Tortilla Joe found some peroxide in the cupboard and washed the wound with this. Buck thought, for a moment, he would pass out with pain, then the effect of the antiseptic wore off.

"You wiggle the fingers, no?"

Buck did. "No bone busted," he said.

"Lucky eet was not your gun-shootin' arm that was hit. There is *mucho* here that Tortilla Joe he do not *sabe.*"

"Some day you'll catch on."

Tortilla Joe bound Buck's wound and it stopped bleeding.

Buck ordered, "Gag the heifer."

Tortilla Joe grinned as he wadded up part of the tablecloth. Pat Adams, eyes furious, retreated. The wall finally stopped her.

"Open the beeg mouth, womans!"

"You go to—"

Tortilla Joe suddenly jammed his thumb into her mouth. She clamped down so hard Buck heard her teeth grit.

The Mexican yelled, swung back his fist, and hurriedly she released his dirty thumb.

He inspected the injured digit carefully. "She almos' bit off my thumb."

"You do it this way," Buck said.

His arm went around her. This time she was not soft and yielding. She did not melt limply against him. She was a rigid, spitting she-wildcat. He poked his .45's barrel between her teeth as she cursed him.

"I sure hate to do this to a lady." His tone were genuine. "This pistol has a hair trigger, but I'll try to keep it from exploding."

HER mouth flopped open. Buck holstered his Colt. Tortilla Joe gingerly jammed the gag into her mouth. Then he tied a length of tablecloth around her jaws to hold the gag in place.

"We ready to travels, Buckshots."

Buck spoke to Pat. "Walk ahead of us. No funny stuff."

"We leave the lamps burnin', Buckshots?"

"What dif does it make?"

They went outside. Pat had tied her horse beside the barn. Buck tied a length of rope to her arms and got her into saddle. Then, with Tortilla Joe leading her horse, with Buck himself trailing behind, holding the rope, they went to where they had left their own cayuses.

The night was windy, with *chamiso* and red-shank bending low to the desert. Tortilla Joe mounted and Buck handed him the rope.

"Listen," he whispered.

Tortilla Joe said, "Somewhere there ees a horse movin'."

A rider came out of the brush and rode up to the house. He dismounted, went inside and, after a few minutes, came out. He cupped his hands and shouted: "Pat, where are you?"

"In the barn, Ned."

Buck McKee grunted, "What the—Somebody's in the barn and he imitates Pat's voice to a T."

Ned Adams called, "What you doing in the barn?"

"My horse—he's caught in the stall. He tried to rear and got his front hoofs in the manger."

Buck stared at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican stared back. Buck heard the Mexican whisper, "Me, I no *sabe* thees."

"That jazabo sure can imitate Pat. And who is he—or is he a she?"

Ned Adams went into the barn. They heard a yelp, a sodden sound, and soon a man came out of the barn, dragging another man behind him. Lamplight showed them clearly.

"Well, I'll be—" Buck moved out of the brush. "What's going on over there?" He made his voice harsh.

The man turned, gun level. Then he recognized Buck. "I trailed this gent out of town after you boys shot your way out. He rode out, talked with Brad Fremont, then headed this way. I followed him."

"You sure clipped him cold."

"I sure did. I hit him with a *manzanita* club." Iroquois Jones gave out with a wild Apache warwhoop. "Same one I knocked Brad Fremont silly with! Say, what is this all about, anyway?"

"I'll tell you as we ride into town."

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CHAPTER X

Gun Trail's End

THE man was dead. He lay on his back, one arm bent under him. Bullets had hammered into his chest, tearing through him. Buck looked at him and said:

"I don't know who he is, Whiskers."

Old Whiskers Watson chewed tobacco, goatee rising and falling. Flophouse Watson, tied to the bed post, also chewed, only the goat chewed hay instead of tobacco. Whiskers' gnarled hand was wrapped around the black-bone handle of a big .45.

"He's a stranger in town, they tell me. Nobody seems to know his name. He came sneaking into my room, pistol in his paw. I sleep with my gun in hand, and I rolled over and gave him what he wasn't looking for."

"You were lucky you were awake," Tortilla Joe said.

Whiskers Watson chortled. "I was asleep right before that, but my pard here"—he gestured toward Flophouse, who kept on chewing hay—"he woke me up. Pawed and reared, and warned me of danger."

Buck said, "This dead gent was sent to murder you. And unless Buck McKee is plumb wrong he was hired by Brad Fremont or by the Adams tribe."

Whiskers snorted. "He was seen talking with Fremont in the saloon. McKee, you sound loco. Why would my friends, Pat Adams and her brother Ned, want to kill me? I'm their pard."

"For your platinum mine."

Watery eyes watched him. "I don't foller you, McKee."

Anger touched McKee's eyes and gave his voice a hard edge. "You're an old fool, Whiskers. First, you advertised me and Tortilla Joe as gunslingers, when we only come to visit you—"

"I got drunk!"

"Shut up, you two-legged billygoat! Second, you told us you hadn't told Pat about that platinum."

The watery eyes vacillated. "Pat—she told you that? Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut?"

"Pat worked you for the fool you are. She had you—an old stiff who should have known better—believing she was in love with you. And all the time she's married."

"Married!"

"Ned ain't her brother. Ned is her husband. Tortilla Joe and me saw that in their family Bible."

"Her—her husband?"

"Yes, and you weren't the only one fooled. She fooled Brad Fremont, too. She played up to him. And by hell, I believe she really loves him!"

Whiskers Watson had stopped chewing. Flophouse Watson regarded them seriously. "Where'd you learn all this, McKee?" Whiskers' voice was a choking whisper.

Buck told about the raid on the Adams' farmhouse. "And besides," he concluded, "Ned ain't no farmer—he's a graduate geologist. We saw his diploma. That woman is behind all this hell. She got Fremont to work with her because he had the power, the men with guns. What idiots we was, eh?"

"You mean what a idiot *I* was. Where's the Adams tribe now?"

"In jail. Iroquois Jones and me and Tortilla jugged 'em. This town is full of farmers and they're armed. When word got out this gent you killed had tried to murder you in bed, in came the farmers armed to the teeth."

Tears showed in the watery eyes. "Good luck I got some friends in my old age." Whiskers Watson wiped his eyes with a red bandanna.

Buck winked at Tortilla Joe. "Joe and me is pullin' out for good, Whiskers. The farmers can take over from here. Iroquois Jones has sent out for the militia to come in."

"You leaving me—and Flophouse?"

Buck nodded. "Iroquois can handle the rest. The Adamses will talk and they'll tie Brad Fremont in on this, and when the soldiers come—"

"Hogwash!" Whiskers Watson snorted like a bull pawing the earth. "This ain't settled and you know it. You've got cold boots and you're running on me, McKee! And the same goes for you, Tortilla Joe!"

"Goo'by."

"*Adios.*"

"Boys, don't jerk stakes on the old man!"

BUCK and Tortilla Joe went down the hallway. When they left the hotel door a gang of riders came down the street. They dismounted and entered the Branding Iron Saloon. Brad Fremont led them.

All the ingredients of a hell brew were now in Warwhoop. The Adamses were in jail, the farmers were primed for trouble, and now the Circle 9 gunslingers were in town.

Iroquois Jones came out of the darkness. "Might be trouble," he said. He made a little war dance. "Wish my pal Geronimo—"

"The Adams pair in your jail and safe?" Buck asked.

"Locked up. Safe, too." Moccasins snapped a war dance. "Me, I'm the only gent with a key to the lockup, too. Where you two going?"

"Heading out of town for good."

"You're—what?"

They left the make-believe Apache rooted to the sidewalk in disbelief. Then they entered the Branding Iron Saloon. When the Circle 9 gunmen saw them a rigid stiffness traveled along the bar. Buck ordered water and Tortilla Joe took a drink of beer. Brad Fremont, backed by Clyde Rangoon, came up to them. Buck glanced at the deputy sheriff's badge on Rangoon's calfskin vest.

Buck pulled his gun and let it dangle from his hand.

"We want no trouble, Fremont. And Rangoon, if you think about spitting at me, I'm killing you. That clear?"

Fremont said, "Clear enough, McKee. What's this I hear about you boys jugging Pat Adams and her brother?"

"Not her brother—her husband."

"Husband?"

"Yes, husband. We read the record in her Bible."

Fremont's face went the color of putty. "Hell, has somebody made a fool out of me, eh? What's the charge against them?"

"Working in cahoots with you to steal old Whiskers Watson's platinum mine." Buck told him the rest. "They aim to be star witnesses when they talk to the circuit judge, and Iroquois Jones is getting the judge over from the county seat tomorrow morning."

Fremont nodded, said nothing; his eyes were dull. Rangoon chewed and it was on Rangoon that Buck had his eyes glued. Rangoon's beady eyes met his and hate glistended in the segundo's glaring stare.

"Where you boys going?" Fremont asked.

"We're pulling out. We got the Adamses in jail and that's enough for us. The farmers here in town can take over from here on."

"Good idea," Fremont said.

Buck said, "We don't need your lip or advice."

Fremont's face colored, then discretion veiled anger. "Good riding, men. None of my hands will try to stop you from leaving."

"They'd better not!"

Buck and Tortilla Joe left. Outside, farmers watched them mount. Then, with a warwhoop, the two galloped into the night. But they did not ride far. A man can't ride away from insults and hate. They circled, came in back of the jail and dismounted, their broncs hidden in the high desert brush.

"You take your rifle, Bucks?"

"Short gun for me, Tortilla Joe. Rifle too hard to handle in a small space. A lesson learned bitterly by one Pat Adams, if I remember right."

"How feels your arm?"

"Not too bad."

They went to the back door of the jail. Iroquois Jones had erred when he had said he had the only key. Unseen by the justice of the peace, Buck had stolen a key to the jail. They entered a dimly lit hall. The jail had two cells. Pat was in one, her husband in the other.

Buck left the back door unlocked.

PAT ADAMS asked, "What do you fools want?" She added some pretty strong cuss words. Her husband said nothing, merely watching them.

"Just checking on your safety," Buck

said. "One of Fremont's killers tried to murder Whiskers Watson."

"We heard about that." Pat said harshly.

Buck repeated, "Just checking, that's all."

He and Tortilla Joe went down the corridor toward Iroquois Jones' office. The Adams couple could not see them. Buck boosted Tortilla Joe up through the hole that led to the attic. Once the Mexican got inside he held his arms down and pulled Buck into the attic. They were in the dark, lying on two-by-four ceiling joists.

"Maybe Fremont he no come."

Buck whispered, "He'll come. Him and Rangoon can't afford to let these Adams people live. They got to kill 'em off because they know too much."

"We make the guinea peeg out of the girl. What eef we miss sometheengs, an' Fremont he keel her? Me, I no feel so good then." Tortilla wet his lips. "After all, she ees the woman. An' my mother she teach me to respect womens."

"She won't get hurt," Buck promised.

They waited over an hour. It was not comfortable lying on the ceiling joists. Buck dozed. At last Tortilla Joe shook him.

"Leesen, Buckshots!"

Heart pounding, Buck heard the slow inward squeak of hinges. Then the voice of Clyde Rangoon said, "That damned door wasn't even locked. This smells like a trap."

"Who would trap us, you fool?" The voice of Brad Fremont.

"I don't trust McKee or that Mex! How come that door was unlocked?"

"There's nobody here. Corridor's empty."

Buck heard boots advance down the corridor, then stop. Then Fremont's voice.

"So you two are man and wife, eh? Thought you could make a fool of Brad Fremont, didn't you? You doublecrossin' heifer, what you got to say before I blast—"

Buck had dropped to the floor. He came down in a crouch, poised and ready, gun up. Behind him dropped Tortilla Joe, .45 anchored in his dark fist.

Fremont stared, lips quivering.

Rangoon watched them, eyes dark. And it was Rangoon who said huskily, "I told you this was a trap! They ain't no way out of this except we shoot our way out and the time to start is now!"

Rangoon, this time, did not spit tobacco juice. His .45 spat lead. But Buck's bullet, hard on that of Rangoon, found its mark. Rangoon's lead tore into the wall behind Buck.

Pat Adams, wild with fear, was screeching. Shrill and harsh, her cries cut through the roar of guns. Rangoon walked ahead, knees bending. Tortilla Joe, shooting hurriedly, had downed Brad Fremont. Rangoon fell over Fremont, then both Circle 9 men lay still.

Outside, men were shouting.

Buck dazedly heard Iroquois Jones' Apache warwhoop.

"You hurt, Tortilla?"

"Fremont's bullet, she knock—" The Mexican took a step, staggered, almost fell. Buck caught him, fear tearing through him.

"He got you in the leg?"

"No, he shoot heel of my boot!"

"We win, Buck."

FARMERS stormed into the jail. All was confusion. Circle 9 men stared at their boss and segundo. Iroquois Jones proudly announced that both were dead. Peace, he claimed, had come to Warwhoop and Ronde Basin. But if the Circle 9 men still wanted trouble—

"Not us," a man said hurriedly. "The man who signed our checks is dead. I'm getting out of here for good."

"Me, too," another puncher said.

They rode out of town, glad to leave. A few minutes later, Buck and Tortilla Joe, both somewhat shaky, stood in front of the hotel.

"We leave now, Buckshots?"

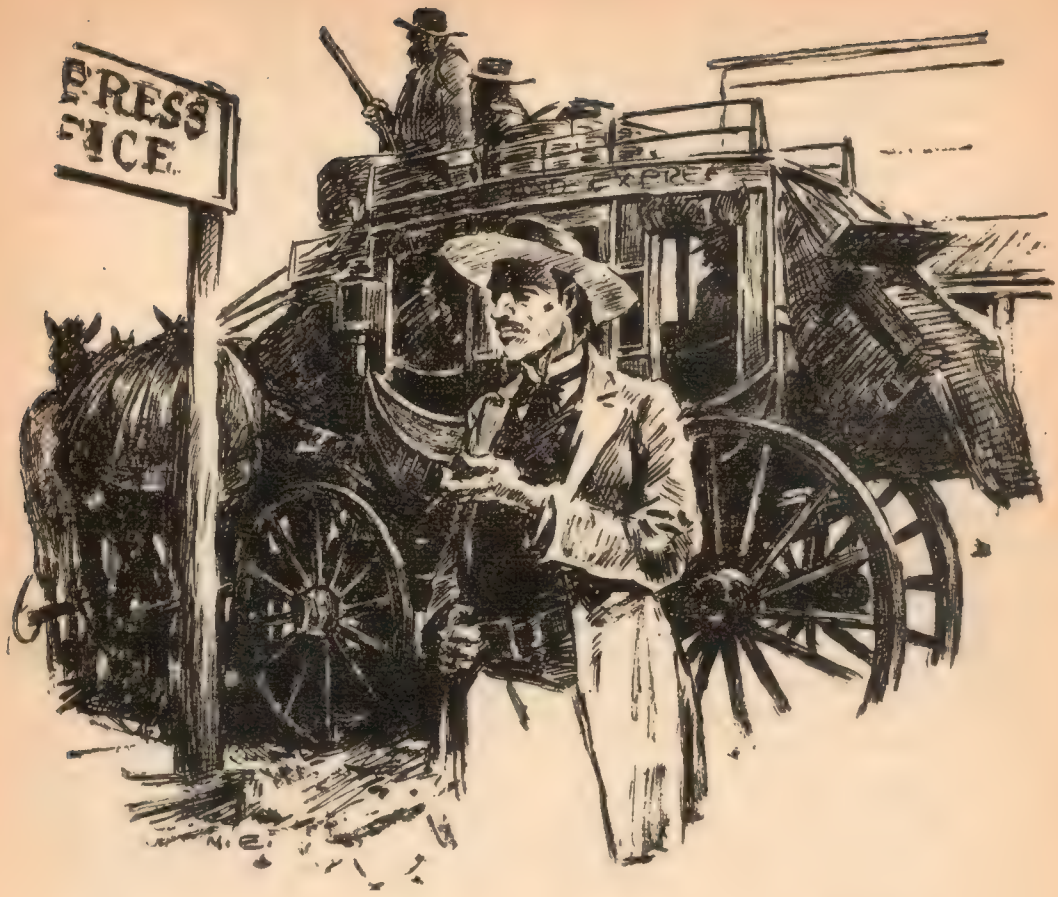
"Leave?" Buck snorted. "Why, shucks, Tortilla Joe, we came here for a vacation. We got things peaceful and nice—" Suddenly his tone softened. "You remember that good-looking girl that has a room opposite old Whiskers' room?"

"*Si*, I see her once. Why?"

"I'm going to get better acquainted with her. And the time to start, I'd say, is now."

Buck entered the hotel. Tortilla Joe stared, mouth open. Then he smiled.

"I go see old Wheeskers Watson," he said, and followed Buck. ● ● ●



Slade of the Overland

Was He a Brutal Killer—or an Outlaw Tamer?

NO MORE controversial figure ever moved across the vast stage of the Old West than this Captain Joseph A. Slade—"Slade of the Overland." Was he one of the stagecoach empire's most loyal employees, or a cold-blooded killer? You could find many answers to that question.

Yet despite the twenty-six notches on Slade's gun butt, no man ever had a greater number of admirers among the better elements of the population. "The man with a thousand friends," contemporary writers called him, and for years the surest way to get your teeth kicked in in a hurry was to speak disparagingly of Slade in the presence of old Overland men.

Little is known of Slade's early years, save that he was born in Illinois and served, with courage and recklessness, in Captain Kill-man's scouts during the Mexican war.

A True Story by T. J. KERTTULA and D. L. McDONALD

His career in the West began when he finished off a fist fight by beating in his opponent's skull with a convenient rock. That night he headed west, two jumps ahead of the local sheriff.

For a time he was trainmaster of an emigrant train out of St. Joseph, Mo. but in an argument with a teamster he shot his first man—and again headed west in a hurry. Next he joined a band of bounty hunters who made a living by killing Apaches and selling their scalps to the government of Chihuahua.

Indians Feared Slade

Slade was one man the Indians really feared, for he possessed a cruelty and ferocity that equalled their own. Having need of his victims' hair as evidence, it was his custom to clip off their ears and send them back to the tribe with the message, "This warrior met up with Captain Slade."

His reputation grew until it came to the attention of the hard-pressed Overland Mail Company, then badly harassed by both white and Indian outlaws. Slade was the type of man they needed, and early in 1859 they sent for him.

Their worst division was that at Julesburg, where the station was presided over by Jules Reni, a French-Canadian rancher who was also a part-time outlaw. Somewhat apprehensively the Overland superintendent invited Slade to oust Reni and take over.

No one now knows quite how this was accomplished, but the next we hear of Slade he is the stationmaster at Julesburg. To the tough bunch that hung out there, the coming of the boyish-looking new agent was a huge joke. The first evening on his new post Slade was approached by one of the wildest of them.

"Sonny," he drawled, "this here is a tough country, and I'm makin' a bet that you won't stick it a month."

Slade leaned negligently against the doorway and sucked his pipe. "Whyn't you do something about it?" he suggested mildly.

"Huh?"

"Make your play—or shut up." Still his voice was deceptively gentle.

The outlaw slapped leather, but was dead before the gun jerked clear. And his pals, carting off the body, shook their heads in wonder at that greased lightning draw of Slade's which they had seen. It was a fact that Slade—even in the heat of battle would often call his shots, "Middle button of his shirt!" etc., and there is no record that he ever called them wrong.

Gang Scoffs at Warning

Jules's gang was hard to convinve. Even when Slade caught two of them making off with the Company's stock and hanged them, the rest still scoffed.

The following week an emigrant train was robbed of its horses almost under the shadow of the Julesburg station. "I take that as a personal insult, folks," Slade told them. "Wait here and I'll see about it." He saddled his horse and rode into the hills back of town. Within an hour he'd located the missing stock in the corrals of one of Jules's boys. Kicking open the cabin door, he went in with both guns blazing. When he emerged a scant five minutes later three dead men and a wounded one lay sprawled on the puncheon floor.

It took only a few more such incidents to convince Reni's boys that the good old days were gone for good around Julesburg. The Company stock was let severely alone and the stages went through on time.

Meanwhile the feud between Slade and Jules Reni smouldered. Slade found out that when Jules left the Company employ he held out one of its teams for his own use. Slade repossessed the animals, and with many a colorful French oath Jules swore vengeance.

For days the two men moved warily about town, Slade armed with his big navy .44 and Jules carting a sawed-off shotgun. One afternoon Jules got the drop and let fly with a double load of buckshot. Slade went down like a poled steer, but dragged himself to his knees and put a bullet through Jules's shoulder. Then both men collapsed on the board sidewalk.

They were carried into a nearby saloon and laid head-to-foot on the long bar. Slade had thirteen slugs in his body.

As soon as Jules Reni could travel he

headed for a hideout in the hills. Slade, despite the fact they never did get eight or nine pieces of buckshot out of his back, also recovered.

With Reni recuperating in the mountains, the Julesburg division was so tame it offered no challenge to Slade's swift gun, so the Company obligingly transferred him to the Mountain division, next-toughest on the line.

Somewhere along in his turbulent career Slade had acquired a beautiful and high-spirited wife, named Virginia Slade, who was a fit mate for a man like Slade.

Lynch Mob Captures Him

About this time, Slade carelessly allowed himself to fall into the hands of a "bad bunch," who decided to lynch him. Slade persuaded them to send for his wife so he could settle his affairs. She arrived with black hair blowing and dark eyes flashing fire. In her clothing she'd hidden two six-guns. At a signal, Slade stepped out with both guns roaring. The owlhoots who survived gave up the idea of a lynching.

A few weeks later Slade and Jules Reni met for the last time. Reni had been losing no opportunity to mouth threats against Slade.

Slade apparently grew tired of hearing about these remarks. He sent four of his own bully-boys to capture Reni. Then he and a friend took the stagecoach and met the four men and their prisoner at Chanseau's ranch, two days' journey from town.

Slade was known to be brutal and quarrelsome when drunk. He had Jules Reni bound hand and foot, tied to a snubbing post in the middle of Chanseau's corral, and left there without food or water overnight. The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, Slade made his leisurely way to the corral, and put the first bullet through Reni's mouth; an agonizing but not fatal wound.

What happened within the next hour has been described as "shooting a helpless man to death by inches." After Jules Reni was dead, Slade cut off his ears and for a long time carried them in his vest pocket.

Prior to this time Slade is reputed to have

[*Turn page*]

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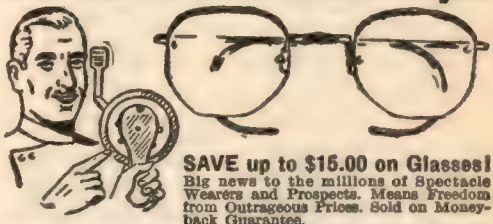

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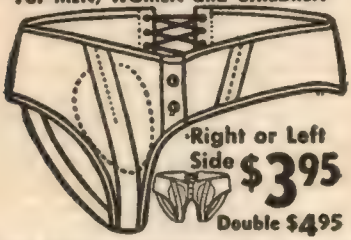

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killed more than a score of men but, aside from Indians, they'd all been local men. Up till now, the general attitude had been, So what? That's what the Company hired him for. But now, though Jules Reni could hardly have qualified as that "one honest man," there was plenty of criticism about taking an hour to shoot Reni to death, after having four other men disarm and tie up the enemy first.

Slade's personal deterioration seems to have been rapid after the death of Jules Reni. As has been said, Slade was a devil when drunk. Within a few months he was in serious trouble for a drunken raid on the Fort Halleck sutler's quarters, and furious Army officers arrested him and held him until the Overland Company reluctantly promised to "fire the killer Slade and run him out of the country."

Drifts to Mining Camps

Out of work and at loose ends, Slade drifted to the Beaverhead mines and, later, to Virginia City. For a time he settled down and started a freighting business on the Milk River, and built a cabin for his wife and the little half-breed boy she had adopted after Slade killed its father.

When cold weather drove the freighters in from their Milk River headquarters in the fall of 1863, Slade went on a series of extended sprees. Although he quickly acquired a gand of rowdy hangers-on during these benders, Slade was never an outlaw or road agent. Nor is there any record of his ever killing anyone after coming to Montana.

But as the winter advanced, Slade's drinking became more and more a town nuisance. When he and his pals took over, most business men closed up. His favorite sport was to ride into stores and bars, wrecking fixtures.

He was arrested many times, and treated the newly-formed courts with due respect. But inevitably, the day came when he defied the People's Court. Drunker even than usual, he and a group of his pals tore up the writ against them, chased the sheriff around the block, and threatened the town's beloved Judge Alexander Davis.

It was an issue that had to be met. Either

Slade or the Law would rule the town's ten thousand population. A call went out for Vigilantes to assemble. In the meantime Slade got drunk, unmercifully beat up a bystander, and went whooping it up the street in his usual carefree fashion.

Meanwhile, Virginia City Vigilantes decided upon his arrest, but it is probable his punishment would have been no worse than banishment.

Virginia City's plans went astray when the Nevada miners, apparently a more hot-headed crew, abandoned their sluice boxes and headed for Virginia City in a body. The Virginia City Committee finally agreed to allow the Nevada miners to have Slade if they wanted him. The six hundred Nevada miners, marching in close formation, soon had Slade in their clutches.

Slade Begs for Mercy

When told he was to die and asked if he had any business to settle, Slade went to pieces. He pleaded to see his wife, but the Committee, wanting no more guns smuggled to the doomed man, curtly refused.

One of his friends, however, rode twelve miles away to summon Virginia Slade. Together they set out at a dead run for town.

Meanwhile, the Vigilantes' preparations were simple and quickly completed. Near Prout's store, they erected a gallows. A large drygoods box served as a platform and Slade, guarded by more than a hundred grim and heavily-armed Nevada miners, was brought up.

At least three thousand scowling men watched him mount the box.

As the rope was fitted around his neck Slade broke down completely. "My God, my God, why must I die?" he wailed. He kept begging to see his wife.

Far out on the Madison road a tiny dust cloud appeared. Slade saw it and a flash of hope crossed his face. The Vigilantes had seen it too. A miner jumped forward and kicked the box aside. Slade, the man who had sent twenty-six of his fellows along that trail before him, headed for the Great Divide.

This time, Virginia Slade would not arrive in time. ● ● ●

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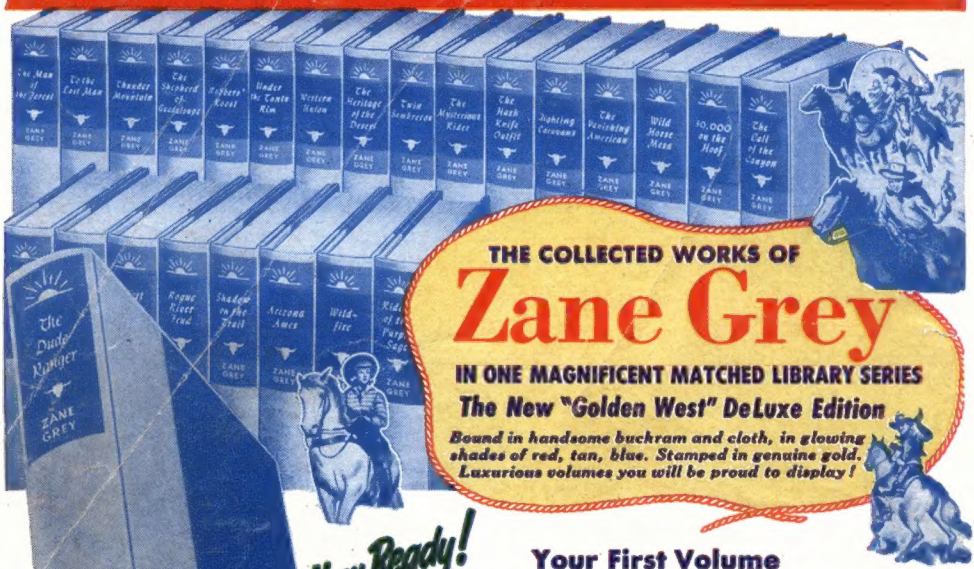

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